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December 12, 2000

Ms. Susan Brenneman  
Los Angeles Times  
202 West First St.  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Susan:

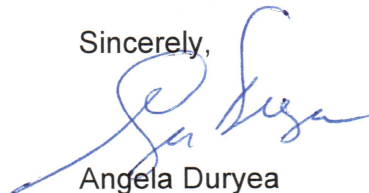
United Nations scientists say now is the time to get ready for the next *El Nino*, and the representatives of the San Francisco Symphony are echoing that same warning. Of course, they're not really talking about the same thing. On January 11, 12, and 13, the San Francisco Symphony will perform the U.S. premiere of *El Nino* (A Nativity Oratorio), the latest collaboration of San Francisco-based composer John Adams and iconoclastic theater, opera, and TV director Peter Sellars at Davies Hall. You may have already received a press release from the San Francisco Symphony with details, but I'm enclosing another copy just to be sure.

The multi-media work, which John Adams calls his own *Messiah* for a new century, is sung in English and Spanish. It incorporates video and dancers and was jointly commissioned by the Symphony, Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, the Barbican Centre in London, the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and by Lincoln Center. Conducting both the San Francisco performances and the world premiere of *El Nino* at the Théâtre du Châtelet this week is Kent Nagano with featured soloists Dawn Upshaw, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, and Willard White.

*El Nino* draws on Nativity sources from Gnostic gospels and Hispanic texts and marks the fourth collaboration of John Adams and Peter Sellars. Their first collaboration, as you know, was *Nixon in China*, which—since its 1987 premiere—has been performed more than 70 times. Their subsequent collaborations have been just as provocative: the *Death of Klinghoffer*, based on the story drawn from front pages of newspapers worldwide, and in 1995, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling, and then I Saw the Sky*, described as an “earthquake romance.”

We hope you will assign a writer to cover this premiere, and we will call you in a few days to see what you think. In the meantime, we're also enclosing some additional materials on *El Nino* for your information.

Sincerely,



Angela Duryea



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**news**

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**KENT NAGANO CONDUCTS SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY AND CHORUS  
IN UNITED STATES PREMIERE OF JOHN ADAMS'S  
NEW NATIVITY ORATORIO, *EL NIÑO*, JANUARY 11-13**

**DAWN UPSHAW, LORRAINE HUNT LIEBERSON AND WILLARD WHITE  
FEATURED IN PETER SELLARS'S SEMI-STAGED PRODUCTION**

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**SAN FRANCISCO, November 29, 2000** – The San Francisco Symphony (SFS) and Chorus present the United States premiere of John Adams's *El Niño*, a Nativity oratorio for the 21st century, January 11-13, 2001 in Davies Symphony Hall. Renowned stage director Peter Sellars has designed a special staging of the work, incorporating film and dancers, for the San Francisco presentation. The evening-length work, sung in English and Spanish, offers a new perspective on the ancient story of the Nativity and draws on diverse sources including Latin American poetry, Biblical texts, and Gnostic Infancy Gospels. *El Niño* was jointly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and Paris's Théâtre du Châtelet.

Conducting both the San Francisco performances and the world premiere of *El Niño* at the Théâtre du Châtelet December 15-23, 2000 (with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester) is long-time Adams champion Kent Nagano. Soloists for the Paris and San Francisco premieres are acclaimed singers Dawn Upshaw, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, and Willard White. The cast is completed by a trio of countertenors, Theater of Voices, whose role in the story telling is every bit as important as the vocal soloists. The children's chorus, Piedmont Choirs, is also featured in addition to the San Francisco Symphony Chorus. The chorus forms the third critical player in the drama, and for this Adams has written his most extensive choral work since his 1991 opera, *The Death of Klinghoffer*.

*El Niño* weaves Nativity texts, which Adams compiled in collaboration with Sellars, from diverse and sometimes surprising sources into a dramatic whole. The work fulfills a longtime wish on Adams's part. "For years, I've known that I would honor this particular Christian myth with a musical setting, but until recently, the particular focus and the choice of texts to articulate my vision had eluded

me,” says Adams. “My own childhood exposure to the Nativity theme was the product of growing up in a small New Hampshire town where the story was represented through the very familiar combination of the King James Bible, English Christmas carols, and of course Handel’s *Messiah*. But I wanted to create a piece that would not necessarily be ‘site-specific’ for December, and would also have more shades of darkness and light in the treatment of the characters. The idea of incorporating Hispanic texts into the libretto was Peter Sellars’s. We both call California home, and the intensity and genuineness of Latin American art and culture is one of the great gifts one receives by living here. Once I was exposed to these texts, the work suddenly came to life in my mind. All of these poets speak of the miraculous with the kind of mystery and intensity that I wanted.”

Adams continues: “For me, having the voices of women poets in my piece was essential. And the choice of these particular women – Rosario Castellanos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Gabriela Mistral, and Hildegard von Bingen – opened up possibilities of another dimension to the story telling. So much of the ‘official’ narrative has traditionally been told by the Church, and presumably by men. But seldom in the orthodox stories is there any more than a passing awareness of the misery and pain of labor, of the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy or of that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth. All of those intense emotional dramas surrounding the birth of a child are touched upon in the Spanish texts of *El Niño*. Furthermore, I found the women’s sensibility more open to the possibility of magic, more welcoming to the notion of miracles.

“The two major voices in the piece are both those of Mexican women. One is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17<sup>th</sup> century nun whose ecstatically revealed poetry reminds me of not only Hildegard von Bingen but also of Emily Dickinson. Sor Juana is famous in Latin countries, making the challenge of setting her poetry something one does only with the greatest respect and care. The other great poet, four of whose poems provide the deepest psychological intuitions in the piece, is Rosario Castellanos. She was a 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist who lived in and wrote mostly about Chiapas, the mountainous southern state of Mexico. She is equally as great a poet as Sor Juana but, being more modern, her imagery is more familiar to us, and her descriptions of pregnancy, labor, sexual union and the physicality of birth give *El Niño* a reality that it otherwise would lack.”

Interwoven within the narrative of *El Niño* are other Nativity texts, including familiar texts such as Luke and Matthew, and the little-known Gnostic Infancy Gospels. These gospels, written at roughly the same time as the New Testament Gospels, treat the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus with



often greater shading, subtlety and even humor than the official Biblical texts. Taking a cue from Handel, Adams did not lock the characters into assigned roles. "I wanted to express Mary in different emotional and psychological guises, and having both a dramatic mezzo and a lyric soprano embody her gave me much greater flexibility. Likewise the baritone soloist can be not only the voice of Joseph but also Herod and God, and he can function as a general narrator as well."

**John Adams** began his career with the San Francisco Symphony and has since become one of America's most admired and frequently performed composers. Although he was born and raised in New England, he has become indelibly linked with the Bay Area. He began his active career teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where his innovative concerts led to his appointment as the San Francisco Symphony's New Music Advisor and composer-in-residence between 1979 and 1985. It was during this period that his reputation became established with the success of such works as *Harmonium* and *Harmonielehre*, both commissioned and premiered by the SFS. His operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* are among the most performed operas in recent history. In 1986, he entered into an exclusive contract with Nonesuch Records. In honor of their fifteen year partnership, Nonesuch recently released *The John Adams Earbox*, a 10-CD compilation comprising almost all of the composer's music over a twenty year period.

One of today's leading theater, opera, and television directors, **Peter Sellars** initially collaborated with John Adams on the composer's first opera, *Nixon in China*, which – since its 1987 premiere – has been performed more than 70 times and has become one of the most provocative creations in the recent history of music theater. Their second collaboration was even more provocative and controversial, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, based on the story drawn from front pages of newspapers worldwide. This 1991 opera was followed soon after in 1995 by their third collaboration, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling, and Then I Saw the Sky*, described as an "earthquake romance."

**Kent Nagano** has established himself as a gifted interpreter of both the operatic and symphonic repertoire. He was Music Director of the Opera National de Lyon from 1989-1998 and of the Hallé Orchestra from 1991-2000. In September 2000, he began his new post as Artistic Director and Chief Conductor of the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and in September 2001 becomes Principal Conductor of Los Angeles Opera. He also maintains his position as Music Director of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Nagano appears regularly at the Salzburg Festival to great critical acclaim, and has recently conducted productions of Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise*, Busoni's *Doktor Faust*, and the world premiere of Kaija Saariaho's opera *L'amour de Loin*.



Among the celebrated singers of our time, soprano **Dawn Upshaw** stands out as an artist of uncommon gifts and imagination. Applauded in the opera houses of New York, Paris, Salzburg, and Vienna for her portrayals of the great Mozart roles, she is also renowned for her work in modern repertoire. Her 2000 season includes three new roles written for her: Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de Loin* at the Salzburg Festival, John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby* at Lyric Opera Chicago, and John Adams's *El Niño* at the Châtelet in Paris. Since 1993, she has given over 30 world premieres.

A native of San Francisco, mezzo-soprano **Lorraine Hunt Lieberson** began her musical career as a violist. A consummate recitalist, concert singer, and a riveting operatic performer, her repertoire ranges from Baroque to the contemporary. Last season, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Myrtle Wilson in the world premiere of John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*. Ms. Hunt Lieberson's current season includes performances of Mahler's Symphony No. 3 with James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra and North American and European tours performing Bach cantatas, semi-staged by Peter Sellars, with Emmanuel Music. She is married to the composer Peter Lieberson.

Bass-baritone **Willard White** makes his SFS debut at these concerts. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, he began his musical training at the Jamaican School of Music and then went on to the Juilliard School. Since making his debut with New York City Opera, he has gone on to sing at the great opera houses of the world, with recent appearances including Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Amsterdam and San Francisco, and Nick Shadow in Peter Sellars's new production of *The Rake's Progress* in Paris. He also recently sang in *La Damnation de Faust* at the Salzburg Festival and appeared as this year's soloist at the famous *Last Night of the Proms*. Mr. White's regular concert appearances include the Berlin Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

**Theatre of Voices** – countertenors **Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings, and Steven Rickards** – was created by **Paul Hillier** to explore the notion of a "theatre" where the scenery is the sound of voices and the action consists of words. The ensemble's repertoire ranges from the experimental and obscure to more familiar early and contemporary music, and they have recorded extensively for Harmonia Mundi USA. Hillier, a Grammy Award nominee and recipient of two Edison prizes, is active as a conductor, singer, and composer. In recent years he has collaborated with a rich diversity of musicians, including the Kronos Quartet, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and members of his ensembles Theatre of Voices and the Pro Arte Singers.

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These concerts are made possible through the generosity of USBancorp Piper Jaffray.

These concerts are made possible through the generosity of the Wattis Major Production Fund and the Wattis New Music Fund.

Kent Nagano's appearance is made possible through the generosity of the Louise M. Davies Guest Conductor Fund.

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**CALENDAR EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE:**

**January 11, 12, 13, 2001 at 8:00 p.m.**

**Davies Symphony Hall**

**UNITED STATES PREMIERE OF JOHN ADAMS'S *EL NIÑO*  
SEMI-STAGED BY PETER SELLARS**

Kent Nagano, conductor

Dawn Upshaw, soprano

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, mezzo-soprano

Willard White, bass

Theater of Voices

Countertenors Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings, Steven Rickards

Dancers Daniela Graça, Nora Kimball, Michael Schumacher

San Francisco Symphony

San Francisco Symphony Chorus

Vance George, Director

Piedmont Choirs

Robert Geary, Artistic Director

**PROGRAM:**

John Adams / *El Niño* (*A Nativity Oratorio*) – United States premiere, SFS co-commission

**TICKETS:** \$28-\$80, available through SFS Ticket Services at (415) 864-6000, or online through the SFS website at [www.sfsymphony.org](http://www.sfsymphony.org).

**PRE-CONCERT TALK:** BankAmerica Foundation "Inside Music" talks are scheduled one hour prior to each concert. The talks are free to all concert ticketholders.

**BROADCAST:** This concert program will be broadcast on KDFC Classical 102.1 FM at 8:00 p.m. on January 23, 2001.

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- SFS -



John Adams

## El Niño

**John Adams discusses his new Nativity oratorio receiving its premiere in Paris on 15 December with Christian Leblé.**

**John Adams, why did you choose to compose this large piece on the traditional Nativity story? Does the story have a special meaning for you?**

The piece is my way of trying to understand what is meant by a miracle. Reading the New Testament Gospels I am always struck by the fact that the essence of the narratives are miracles. They are miracles performed by Jesus or by God through the actions of Jesus. I don't fully understand why the story must be told in this manner, but I accept as a matter of faith that it must be so. I am sure there are many explanations ranging from the logical to the mystical. Each of us who consider the story has to come to terms with these miracles and what they mean. The Nativity story is the first of these miracles, and *El Niño* is a meditation on these events. In fact, my original working title for it was *How Could This Happen?* This phrase, taken from the Antiphon for Christmas Eve, also must surely have been uttered by me at the births of my own children and by countless others who have contemplated birth.

**Do you have an interpretation that coincides with a traditional religious viewpoint?**

I was brought up in the New England Unitarian tradition which is the same tradition of Emerson, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists. Theirs is a "humanist" approach to religion and probably the least mystically inclined of all Christian teachings. I remember as a boy listening to the way the stories from the Bible were analyzed as metaphors of morality. The moral teachings were taken to heart. But the New Englanders I grew up with were for the most part uncomfortable with the kind of superreality that exists in the Gospels. So when, some thirty five years later, I came to the point of creating this new piece I found myself confronted by all the miracles in the story. How was I to deal with them? Would I treat the Annuciation, the Virgin Birth, the visitation of the Magi, the Christmas star all merely as metaphors, as any "rational" person would do? Or would I look deeper inside myself and try to find a different reality, a reality in which these events are truths? Jung said that a religious truth obeys its own logic, and this logic is different from the truth of the corporeal world.

**You have written two operas, *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, with themes drawn from contemporary events. How does it feel to be composing to a theme that is very old and has been the subject of so many works of art for centuries?**



Entering into this myth, making art about it and finding one's own voice to express it can't help but put one in a very humble position. You realize that you're just another artisan adding another stone to an edifice that is already centuries old and infused with the effort and genius of many who have gone there before and done it better than you. Perhaps that is why, upon completing it, I found that I could detect a certain medieval quality to some of what I've written. That quality is not there as an exoticism but rather as a artifact, a "tonality" that acknowledges the venerable nature of the material and sets the emotional tone.

**For an American composer whose music drawn so much from your country's political and cultural identity, a work with a title in Spanish is a surprise. Why did you chose to call the piece "El Niño"?**

Well, first of all, anyone living today in California has to be aware that English is not the only language spoken by Americans. And even though there are some politicians who would like to consecrate English as the "only" language, the fact is that we are a wonderfully polyglot society, and Spanish is only one of many of the idioms spoken here. But more important, what makes the libretto for *El Niño* special is the incorporation of texts in Spanish by several Latin American poets, most of them women. These texts are about the Nativity and, when mixed with the more familiar Biblical texts, give a color and a tonality to the work that I find deeply satisfying. The idea of incorporating Hispanic texts into the libretto was Peter Sellars's. I'd asked him to help me in the creation of the libretto. We both call California home, and the intensity and genuineness of Latin American art and culture is one of the great gifts one receives by living here. For me, having the voices of women poets in my piece was essential. And the choice of these particular women—Rosario Castellanos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Gabriela Mistral and Hildegard von Bingen-- opened up possibilities of another dimension to the story telling. So much of the 'official' Nativity narrative has traditionally been told by the Church, and presumably by men. But seldom in the officially sanctioned stories is there any more than a passing awareness of the misery and pain of labour, of the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy or of that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth. All of those extreme emotional states surrounding the birth of a child are touched upon in the Spanish texts in *El Niño*. The two major voices in the piece are both those of Mexican women. One is Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a 17<sup>th</sup> century nun whose ecstatically revealed poetry reminds me of not only Hildegard von Bingen but also of Emily Dickinson. Sor Juana is famous in Latin countries, making the challenge of setting her poetry something one does only with the greatest respect and care. The other great poet, four of whose poems provide the deepest psychological intuitions in the piece, is Rosario Castellanos. She was a 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist who lived in and wrote mostly about Chiapas, the mountainous southern state of Mexico where the most "indigenous" of its people live. She is equally as great a poet as Sor Juana but, being more modern, her imagery is more familiar to us, and her descriptions of pregnancy, labor, sexual union and the physicality of birth give *El Niño* a reality that it otherwise would lack. Furthermore, I found the

women's sensibility more open to the possibility of magic, more welcoming to the notion of miracles.

**You've also included religious texts that stand outside the Biblical canon.**

Yes, the Hispanic texts are interwoven with other Nativity texts, some familiar, such as Luke and Matthew, and others not so familiar, such as the little-known Gnostic Infancy Gospels. These "pseudo-gospels" (as the Church so calls them) were written at roughly the same time as the New Testament Gospels. Some are like children's stories or fairy tales, while others are every bit as serious and probing as the official gospels. In the Gospel of James, for instance, there is a psychological shading, a subtlety about human relations, even humour, that is not so apparent in either Luke or Matthew. I was attracted to the portrait of Joseph in the Gospel of James because he demonstrated more human foibles, weaknesses of a middle-aged male that I immediately recognized all too well. In the wonderful scene where he discovers Mary's pregnancy he is suspicious, accusatory and unwilling to accept what Mary is telling him. He can only think of how this scandal will reflect poorly on himself. So this makes his leap of faith, when it finally comes, all the greater.

Another scene from the same Gnostic sources provided me with an image that is unforgettable. It is the moment before the birth, and Joseph suddenly realizes that the entire earth has stopped and is frozen in a state of suspended animation. The birds have stopped singing, the water ceases to flow, people are frozen in the middle of a simple gesture like eating or tending to an animal. It is a moment of absolute stillness, the prelude to the birth and all calamity and joy and sorrow that is about to come into the world. There is nothing quite like this scene in the Bible itself. It's like one of those infinitely detailed landscapes from the Middle Ages where a whole community of people, peasants, lords, children, animals and their surroundings are caught in lovingly depicted precision.

**The title of *El Niño*, the "little boy", conjures up images of hurricane-force winds...**

My choice of title is admittedly provocative, given the association people have of late with storms and violent weather. In Guatemala it must surely come with a bitter association of a catastrophic natural force which caused terrible misery and grief for millions of poor people only a few years ago. But that association is right. As Sor Juana so often says, a miracle is not without its alarming force. Christ was referred to as the "Wind", a kind of tempest that blows away all that comes in its path and transforms it. Herod knows this. We all know it when a child comes into the world. It comes with both the potential to do evil and the power to bring love.



**The work appears closest in form to a traditional oratorio. But theatrical stagings for it are also planned. How do you view it, and did this affect the way you created the music?**

I want the work to be flexible and not necessarily tied to any one way of presentation. Having Peter Sellars do a staged version was part of the origin of the piece, but I also look forward to experiencing the piece simply as a concert work in the manner of *Messiah*. I am also concerned that this not be a "site specific" piece tied to the Christmas season. The subject is obviously too big to be forced into any particular calendar period.

I am indebted to Jean-Pierre Brossmann for his encouragement to create this piece. He provided the early moral support that I needed to take on such a large project. At one point several years ago, when I was on the verge of dropping the idea, he even flew to London to argue passionately for me to continue. Other people who have had important roles to play in the creation were Kent Nagano, a long-time advocate of my music and the conductor who brought *The Death of Klinghoffer* to life; Peter Pastreich, the former executive director of the San Francisco Symphony, who provided the enthusiasm for that organization's involvement; Linda Golding of Boosey & Hawkes, my publisher; Jane Moss of Lincoln Center; and of course Peter Sellars, my longtime collaborator and friend, and the person to whom *El Niño* is dedicated.



## EL NIÑO

JOHN COOLIDGE ADAMS was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on February 15, 1947 and now lives in Berkeley. *El Niño* is a setting of texts taken or adapted from poems by Rosario Castellanos, Gabriela Mistral, Hildegard of Bingen, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rubén Darío, and Vicente Huidobro, as well as some anonymous versions and passages from the Bible, the New Testament Apocrypha, and the Wakefield Mystery Plays. Peter Sellars was instrumental in assisting the composer with assembling the libretto, and the score is dedicated to him. *El Niño* was commissioned by Le Châtelet (Paris), the San Francisco Symphony, the Barbican Centre (London), the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia (Rome), and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts (New York). Adams completed the score on November 8, 2000, and the first performance was given at the Châtelet, Paris, on December 15. Kent Nagano conducted forces including soprano Dawn Upshaw, mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, bass-baritone Willard White, three countertenors from Paul Hillier's Theater of Voices, London Voices, and the Deutsche Sinfonie-Orchester (Berlin). The production, by Peter Sellars, included dancers Daniela Graça, Nora Kimball, and Michael Schumacher, as well as sets, designs, costumes, and a film by Yreina Cervantes, Martin Pakledinaz, James F. Ingalls, and Mark Grey. These are the first performances in the United States. The score calls for soprano, mezzo-soprano, and baritone soloists, a male ensemble consisting of three countertenors, a mixed chorus, a children's chorus (optional), and an orchestra of flute (doubling piccolo), piccolo (doubling flute), oboe (doubling English horn), English horn (doubling oboe), clarinet, bass clarinet (doubling clarinet), bassoon, contrabassoon (doubling bassoon), three horns, three trombones, glockenspiel, triangles of three sizes, gong, Alpine herd bells, guiro, maracas, high cowbell, temple block, tam-tam, chimes, claves, temple bowls, piano, celesta, electronic sampler, two steel-string guitars, harp, and strings.

"Scenes from my childhood": Those are the opening words of *Tom Sails Away*, a poignantly beautiful song by Charles Ives, a composer—and fellow New Englander—who has meant a lot to John Adams. *El Niño* might not immediately evoke Woodstock,

Vermont, in the 1950s, but that too is part of its background or, as Adams himself would probably put it, the DNA of this captivatingly multi-faceted work. The musical part of John Adams's childhood included clarinet lessons with his father and playing in marching bands with him, and an integral part of it was the celebration of Christmas through music, the whole range, from *Jingle Bells* through *Good King Wenceslas* to *Messiah*. Describing all that at a talk about *El Niño* at the San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum in November, Adams had to stop and laugh: "It's all too picturesque, isn't it? Like something dreamed up by a casting director."

However that may be, it is true. "I love *Messiah*," Adams goes on to say, and it follows quite naturally—and with not the slightest touch of arrogance or suggestion of equivalence—when, with another laugh, he comes out with it: "I wanted to write a *Messiah*." He never thought that with his "checkered religious background" he would find himself writing a religious work. "I envy people with strong religious belief. Mine is shaky and unformed. I don't know what I'm saying and one reason for writing *El Niño* was to find out." Digging deep into your own psyche, you learn.

But Adams had also always wanted to write a work about birth, and while *El Niño* is about a specific birth, its subject is more generally the miracle of birth itself. The birth of his daughter Emily in 1984 was an event that changed his life, and the recollection of it still amazes him: "There were four people in the room, and then there were five." For the Western World, the Nativity is, after the myth of the creation of Adam, the most famous of all births, and that, Adams thought, would make it a good pretext or matrix for a contemplation and celebration of Birth. (He was startled to discover that his own teenage offspring were less familiar with the details of the Nativity story than he expected.)

Adams has had a tight association with the San Francisco Symphony ever since he became Edo de Waart's new-music adviser in the 1978-79 season. He went on to serve as the Symphony's first composer-in-residence and founded the New and Unusual Music concert series. The works he has written for the San Francisco Symphony are *Harmonium*, *Grand Pianola Music*, *Harmonielehre*, *El Dorado*, and now *El Niño*. The



Symphony had asked him for a work for chorus and orchestra, and at about the same time the Châtelet Theater in Paris proposed that he write an opera for performance there. Adams saw how he could combine these projects by writing an oratorio that could be staged, and so the practicalities came together. (The other commissioning groups in London, New York, Rome, and Rotterdam came on board later.)

The first compositional question to be dealt with was the choice or the assembling of a text. Adams never intended to offer a straight Biblical narrative; rather, he imagined from the beginning that he would follow the plan that appears in various forms in, for example, the Bach Passions and Christmas Oratorio, in *Messiah* itself, and such twentieth-century works as Britten's *War Requiem* and Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Requiem for a Young Poet*—a plan that interlards a basic narration with commentary from other sources.

Something else Adams knew early on was that he wanted women's voices clearly heard in a work whose subject was birth: "How can you tell this story in the year 2001 and not have a woman's voice? Seldom in the officially sanctioned stories is there any more than a passing awareness of the misery and pain of labor, of the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy, or of that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth." All of that can, however, be found in the piercingly eloquent poems by Hispanic women to which Peter Sellars drew Adams's attention when asked to help with the libretto. (Sellars is not just a director of genius and Adams's collaborator in several previous projects, including the operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*, but one of those miraculous non-musicians who understand music more deeply than most professionals. Sellars, to whom Adams dedicated *El Niño*, planned the stage presentation for the first performances of *El Niño* in Paris.)

The last verbal component to come into focus for Adams was the title. He originally called the work *How Could This Happen?* He had found the phrase in German in a motet by the sixteenth-century Franco-Flemish master Orlando di Lasso, and it comes from an antiphon for Advent. But Adams noticed that people kept "mangling" the title in conversation, and so he came to the conclusion that there was something not right about



it. Hence the change last summer to *El Niño*. It is a signal, too, of the importance of the Hispanic element in the work, an important point for Adams, who delights in living in a polyglot culture and who has said that “the intensity and genuineness of Latin American art and culture is one of the great gifts one receives by living in California.” About one-third of *El Niño* is in Spanish. Adams has anticipated the comment that his new title will bring the Weather Channel to mind: “The association [with storms and violent weather] is right. As Sor Juana...says, a miracle is not without its alarming force. Christ was referred to as the ‘Wind,’ a kind of tempest that blows away all that comes in its path and transforms it. Herod knows this. We all know it when a child comes into the world.”

Some of the text of *El Niño* will be familiar to you, for example the words from Saint Luke known as the *Magnificat*, Mary’s response to the Annunciation: “My soul doth magnify the Lord.” (The most famous musical setting, in Latin, is Bach’s.) Another is a passage from Haggai, a sixth-century prophet whose book appears near the end of the Old Testament: “For thus saith the Lord: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land....” Handel sets it (in slightly different verbal form) in *Messiah*. (This is the only instance where Adams goes directly head to head with his great precursor.)

An important part of what gives *El Niño* its distinctive expressive and literary flavor is the presence of many passages from the New Testament Apocrypha. (The Greek word “apocrypha” means “things that are hidden.”) This is a collection of some thirty books—by its very nature, the text has never been fixed—that resemble the gospels, acts, and epistles in the New Testament, many of them written at about the same time as the New Testament gospels, but which for reasons that range from doubts about their authenticity to accusations of heresy, have never been accepted as part of the canon. You have to acquire the New Testament Apocrypha as a separate book, and you will not usually find it in religious bookstores. Rejected though it may be by the Church, the New Testament Apocrypha makes for lively and varied reading. Some of it seems as though written for children or at least for quite a naive audience; other parts are as deeply serious as anything you will find in the canon. The Nativity narratives are often humanly more

penetrating than the official ones, and you also find a vein of humor of which there is not a trace in the writings attributed to the four New Testament evangelists.

*El Niño* is in two parts, the first of which ends with the miraculous birth and the appearance of the Christmas star. It begins with a medieval English poem, *I Sing of a Maiden*, sung by the chorus and two countertenors. The music begins with what has become an Adams signature, the steady chugging of a single chord—here D minor—but with the texture quickly becoming more complex as cross-rhythms and dissonant notes are added to the mix. I don't know whether the opening of Beethoven's Ninth, where a D on the bassoon enters to blur the harmony, was a consciously chosen model for Adams, but the effect is similar. And as at the beginning of *Harmonium*, the chorus, first just reiterating the syllable "may," then adding repetitions of "King, King, King," gradually finds its way into the poem:

I sing of a maiden,  
A matchless maiden,  
King of all Kings...

A huge crescendo for the orchestra alone propels us into *Hail, Mary, Gracious!*, a text taken from one of the mystery plays that made the little Yorkshire town of Wakefield famous in the Middle Ages. Its subject is the Annunciation. The male ensemble of three countertenors takes the part of Gabriel, while the soprano assumes the role of Mary. Taking a cue from Handel, Adams does not lock his three soloists into specific roles: later, in fact in the very next movement, we will find the mezzo-soprano singing the part of the Virgin. Here Mary's music is in that vein of rapt lyricism that makes Pat Nixon's aria in *Nixon in China* such a lovely moment.

Now we come to the first of *El Niño*'s Spanish texts. In my long listening life, I have often been grateful to composers for showing me wonderful poets whose work I had not known: Schubert and Mahler with Friedrich Rückert, for example, or Schumann with Justinus Kerner, and Britten with Thomas Hardy. I am sure I will not be the only listener



for whom *El Niño* will, among other things, mean the first amazed encounter with the writing of Rosario Castellanos, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Rubén Darío, and Vicente Huidobro. Even in translation, it is clear that Castellanos and Sor Juana must be among the greatest poets in any language.

Castellanos was born in Mexico City in 1925 and died in 1974 in Tel Aviv, where she was serving as Mexican ambassador to Israel. She was a writer of enormous range, deeply interested in Mexico's pre-Columbian heritage, but at the same time a thoroughly committed citizen of the mid-twentieth century. Here she is represented by a long poem, impassioned and inward, titled *La anunciación*, something to set beside the great Annunciation paintings and, in poetry, Rilke's *Mariä Verkündigung* (*The Annunciation to Mary*), so powerfully set to music by Paul Hindemith. Adams gives Castellanos's words to the mezzo-soprano, who makes her way through the feast of imagery in strong and varied musical declamation. The orchestra begins delicately and ends in a blaze of string sound.

This expansive song is followed by a chorus on words from Saint Luke, brief, punchy, tight. This is in fact the shortest section of *El Niño*.

The next movement, *The Babe Leaped in Her Womb*, also draws on the third Gospel, but with a very different sort of text. This sets before us the touching scene of the Visitation, Mary's visit to her cousin Elisabeth. At Mary's greeting, the child in Elisabeth's womb, the child who will grow up to be John the Baptist, leaped in her womb for joy. The three countertenors, with brief help from the chorus, tell the story and sing Elisabeth's jubilant words.

Then, still drawing on Saint Luke, comes the *Magnificat*, sung by the soprano with support from two of the countertenors and the women of the chorus.

Now the story is continued by the Gospel of James in the New Testament Apocrypha. James, known as the Just, was one of the first leaders of the Christian church in Jerusalem

and died a martyr's death there in about the year 65. Some theologians believe him to have been a cousin of Jesus. A marvelously lively and humanly perceptive writer, he tells the story of Joseph, after a long absence, coming home to find his sixteen-year-old bride six months pregnant, and reacting in anger and suspicion, disbelieving her protestations, at this point thinking only like a *macho* male of how bad this makes him look. The scene is set by the ensemble of countertenors, the baritone takes the part of Joseph, with the countertenors and the soprano sharing the words of the teenage mother-to-be.

James goes on to tell how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, persuading him that "that which is conceived in [Mary's] womb is of the Holy Ghost," and foretelling the circumstances of Jesus' birth "among the animals and beasts of burden, on a cold night, in a strange land, and in a poor resting place." To James's text Adams adds words from Matthew, Isaiah, and one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons. The baritone changes roles from Joseph to storyteller, and this movement, titled *Joseph's Dream*, culminates in a great orchestral crescendo that spills directly into the next section.

This is called *Shake the Heavens*. It begins with the passage from Haggai I mentioned earlier—"I will shake the heavens, and the earth..."—but moves into another passage from the Gospel of James, describing Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, Mary both weeping and laughing "because I see two people with my eyes, the one weeping and mourning, the other rejoicing and glad." Inevitably, the "shaking" passage alludes to Handel, though without the eighteenth-century virtuoso coloraturas. The continuation from James enlists the countertenor trio both to tell the story and to pose Joseph's questions, with soprano and mezzo-soprano joining together to give us Mary's reply.

*Se habla de Gabriel (Speaking of Gabriel)* brings us another poem by Rosario Castellanos, one that wryly and powerfully evokes what Adams referred to as "the misery and pain of labor...the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy or...that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follows the moment of birth." Soprano and mezzo-soprano brings us Castellanos's words over a slow-moving accompaniment.



Without break, the music moves into more words from the New Testament Apocrypha, partly James, partly the so-called Latin Infancy Gospel. This is a wondrously moving passage in which Joseph, in the moments before the Birth, suddenly realizes that all the world, the heavens, the birds of the air, the workers on earth, the sheep and their shepherd, the rivers, the ocean, and the winds have become totally still, and “the maiden stood looking intently into heaven.” It is the moment when Joseph understands. Quietly, the baritone evokes this miraculous scene.

The first part of *El Niño* concludes with a fiery poem by Gabriela Mistral (1899-1957), the great Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954, the first Latin American writer to be so honored. In swift-moving verse she evokes the mixed ecstasy and pain of religious revelation, the chorus, later joined by the countertenor trio and the three soloists giving voice to her words. It is heard in a translation by Maria Jacketti. Adams conflates Mistral’s lines with the enraptured utterance *O quam preciosa* (*Oh, how precious*), by the twelfth-century mystic and writer Hildegard of Bingen. The music descends from the great crest it has reached, and the last word we hear is “paradisum”: “The tender shoot which is the Virgin’s son has opened Paradise.”

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1658-1695), whose poem *Pues mi Dios ha nacido a penar* (*Because My Lord was Born to Suffer*) opens Part Two of *El Niño*, has been called Mexico’s Tenth Muse and the Mexican Phoenix. She was a brilliant writer and intellectual who was a nun from her twenty-first year until her death. She learned to read at three, taught herself Latin before she was in double digits, tried in vain to have her mother send her to the university in Mexico City disguised as a boy, and devoted much of her life campaigning against the notion that women should not be educated. Her poems are recognized as the first truly Mexican ones as distinct from traditional Spanish verse written on New World soil. *Pues mi Dios* is a remarkable short example of what her mind and ear could produce, its text, which speeds up so powerfully toward its close, being an artful play of opposites and paradox. It reads like something designed for musical settings, and Adams, using the mezzo-soprano and the chorus (all of it at first, then the

men only), projects the dialogue vividly and creates a most evocative atmosphere for this extraordinary poem.

Now *El Niño* reverts to the Bible, this time to Matthew's account of Herod's plot to seek out the Child in order, supposedly, to worship him. The setting, over a restless accompaniment, is for baritone and the trio of countertenors.

The commentary on Herod's deceitful plan comes from Isaiah: *Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good*. Again we hear the baritone, this time backed by the full chorus, with the orchestra providing a kind of stride bass.

*And the Star Went Before Them* is Matthew's account of the voyage of the Three Kings, represented here by the three soloists.

Rubén Darío (1867-1916), a Nicaraguan poet, fleshes out the story of Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar with reverence, charm, and warmth. The kings are neatly characterized by the three countertenors, and the soprano adds the touching close, bidding the three to be still, for "Love has triumphed and bids you to its feast."

A brief link, *And When They Were Departed*, tells how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, bidding him to flee to Egypt with his family. The words are from Matthew, and they are sung by the chorus.

*Dawn Air*, for the baritone, is part meditation but even more of a love song. The poem is by the Chilean writer Vicente Huidobro (1893-1948), and Adams has set it in the English translation of David Guss.

The next section, another of great brevity, tells of Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents. The chorus, in an almost percussive declamatory style, sings the text from Matthew, and the orchestra's final punctuation is fierce.



The commentary on the slaughter, an enraged lament, uncompromisingly twentieth-century in language and tone, is by Rosario Castellanos: *Memorial de Tlatelolco* (*Memorandum on Tlatelolco*). On August 13, 1521, Tlatelolco, now part of Mexico City, was the scene of the last great confrontation between the Aztecs and Cortés and his *conquistadors*. Casualties were terrible on both sides, but the defeat of the Aztecs was decisive and the history of modern *mestizo* Mexico begins on that day. On October 2, 1968, Tlatelolco Square was once again the scene of bloodshed. A youth revolt had been brewing that summer as in so many countries in America and Europe. The first killings by police took place on September 21, with more to follow a few days later. On October 2 in the early evening, some 5,000 troops with jeeps, tanks, armored cars, and helicopters attacked the huge crowd of civilians, many of them students, who had filled the square. Mexican police admitted to thirty-two deaths; independent estimates by British journalists set the number at at least ten times that amount. The poet's fury is directed not only at the event but also at the subsequent effort to suppress reports of it.

This is the biggest single movement in *El Niño*. The soprano leaves her lyric manner to project the poet's words in wide-ranging lines of enormous expressive power. When the poet bitterly tells the reader not to bother looking in the archives "because nothing has been recorded there," the chorus joins in the painful probing of the terrible scene.

Further comment comes from Isaiah—*In the Day of the Great Slaughter*—set as a percussively declamatory chorus.

*Pues está tiritando* (*Since Love is Shivering*) again testifies to the extraordinary powers and, no less, the extraordinary original of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Each stanza brings a new set of contemplations on the power of the four ancient elements, water, earth, air, and fire. The hurling of answers to the repeated question, "Who will come to his aid?", brings to mind the powerful antiphonal rhetoric in some of the choruses and arias of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*.

Now the expressive climate changes as *El Niño* moves into the realm of the quasi-children's tales that give the New Testament Apocrypha part of its special flavor. The story of the infant Jesus facing down the dragons is told by the writer known (a bit disparagingly) as pseudo-Matthew, most probably Matthias, the apostle chosen to take the place of Judas. The setting is for soprano and the ensemble of countertenors.

Also from pseudo-Matthew comes the tale of the palm tree that, at the bidding of the infant Jesus, bowed down so that Mary might partake of its fruit and then caused a stream of water to appear to quench the thirst of the Holy Family. The passage is another that exhibits delightfully sharp human perception, again, I am afraid, at the expense of the blunt Joseph, who might be any modern American *paterfamilias* on a cross-country car trip. Adams combines it with another Castellanos poem, *Una palmera (A Palm Tree)*. In this setting, one of touching simplicity, the Spanish poem gradually displaces the pseudo-Biblical tale. It ends beautifully:

From the dark land of men  
I've come kneeling to admire you.  
Tall, naked, alone.  
A poem.

The last word we hear, sung softly by high voices—ideally those of children, accompanied by a single guitar, is “*poesía*.”

—*Michael Steinberg*



**El Niño**  
libretto adapted by John Adams  
9/00

**1. I sing of a maiden**

I sing of a maiden,  
a matchless maiden,  
King of all kings  
for her son she's taken.

He comes there so still,  
his mother's yet a lass.  
He's like the dew in April  
that falleth on the grass.

He comes there so still  
to his mother's bower  
He's like the dew in April  
that falleth on the flower.

He comes there so still  
to where his mother lay.  
He's like the dew in April  
that falleth on the spray.

Mother and maiden  
was never none but she—  
well may such a lady  
God's mother be.

Anonymous (Early English)

**2. Hail, Mary, gracious!**

Gabriel:       Hail, Mary, gracious!  
                  Hail, Maiden, and God's spouse!  
                  To thee I bow, devout;  
                  Of all virgins thou art queen,  
                  That ever was, or shall be seen,  
                  Without a doubt.

Hail, Mary, and well thou be!  
My Lord of heaven is with thee,  
                  Without an end;  
Hail, woman, most of grace!  
Fear not nor feel disgrace,  
                  That I command.

For thou hast found, without a doubt,  
The grace of God that has gone out  
    For Adam's plight.  
This is the grace that gives thee bloom,  
Thou shalt conceive within they womb  
    A child of might.

Mary:           What is thy name?

Gabriel:                 Gabriel,  
God's strength and his angel,  
    That comes to thee.

Mary:           Wondrous words are in they greeting,  
But to bear God's gentle sweeting,  
    How should it be?

I slept never by man's side,  
But in maidhood would abide  
    Unshaken.  
Therefore, I know not how  
This may be, because a vow  
    I have taken.  
Nonetheless, full well I know  
God may work his will below  
    Thy words fulfilling.  
But I know not the manner,  
Therefore, teach me, thou messenger,  
    God's way instilling.

Gabriel:       Lady, this the secret hear of me;  
The holy ghost shall come to thee,  
    And in his virtue  
Thee enshroud and so infuse,  
Yet thou thy maidhood shall not lose,  
    But ay be new.  
No word, lady, that I bring,  
Is impossible to heaven's king,  
    Who all has wrought.

Mary:           My lord's love will I not withstand,  
I am his maiden at his hand,  
    And in his fold.  
Gabriel, I believe that God will bring  
To pass with me each several thing  
    As thou hast told.

(Wakefield Mystery Play)



### 3. La anunciación

Porque desde el principio me estabas destinado.  
Antes de las edades del trigo y de la alondra  
y aún antes de los peces.

Cuando Dios no tenía más que horizontes  
de ilimitado azul y el universo  
era una voluntad no pronunciada.

Cuando todo yacía en el regazo  
divino, entremezclado y confundido,  
yacíamos tú y yo totales, juntos.

Pero vino el castigo de la arcilla.

Me tomó entre sus dedos, desgarrándome  
de la absoluta plenitud antigua.

Modeló mis caderas y mis hombros,  
me encendió de vigiliassin sosiego  
y me negó el olvido.

Yo sabía que estabas dormido entre las cosas  
y respiraba el aire para ver si te hallaba  
y bebía de las fuentes como para beberte.

Huérfana de tu peso dulce sobre mi pecho,  
sin nombre mientras tú no descendieras  
languidecía, triste, en el destierro.

Un cántaro vacío semejava  
nostálgico de vinos generosos  
y de sonoras e inefables aguas.

Una cítara muda parecía.

No podía siquiera morir como el que cae  
aflojando los músculos en una  
brusca renunciación. Me flagelaba  
la feroz certidumbre de tu ausencia,  
adelante, buscando tu huella o tus señales.  
No podía morir porque aguardaba.

Porque desde el principio me estabas destinado  
era mi soledad un tránsito sombrío  
y un ímpetu de fiebre inconsolable.

Porque habías de venir a quebrantar mis huesos  
y cuando Dios les daba consistencia pensaba  
en hacerlos menores que tu fuerza.

Dócil a tu ademán redondo mi cintura  
y a tus orejas vírgines mi voz, disciplinada  
en intangibles sílabas de espuma...

Porque habías de venir a quebrantar mis huesos,  
mis huesos, a tu anuncio, se quebrantan.

He aquí que te anuncias.

Entre contradictorios ángeles te aproximas,  
como una suave música te viertes,  
como un vaso de aromas y de bálsamos.

### 3. The Annuciation

Because from the start you were fated to be mine.  
Before the ages of wheat and larks  
and even before fishes.

When God had nothing more than horizons  
of unending blue and the universe  
was a will not yet pronounced.

When everything lay in the divine  
lap, confused and intertwined,  
you and I lay there complete, together.

But then came the punishment of clay.

It took me in its fingers, tore me  
from that absolute and ancient fullness.

It shaped my hips and shoulders,  
inflamed me with unceasing wakefulness  
and denied me oblivion.

I knew that you were there asleep among all things  
and I breathed the air hoping to find you  
and drank from fountains as if to drink you in.

Deprived of your sweet weight on my chest,  
nameless so long as you did not descend,  
I languished in exile, forlorn.

I was like an empty jug  
nostalgic for generous wines  
and sonorous, ineffable water.

I resembled a mute zither.

I couldn't even die like one who falls  
with the loose muscles of a brusque  
renunciation. I was whipped  
by the fierce certainty of your absence  
just ahead, seeking your footprints or your sign.  
I couldn't die because I was still waiting.

Because from the start you were fated to be mine  
my solitude was a somber passage,  
an impetus of inconsolable fever.

Because you were to come and break my bones  
and when God gave them their form he thought  
to make them less than your strength.

Docile my waist to the roundness of your touch  
and to your virgin ears my voice, disciplined  
in intangible syllables of foam...

Because you were to break my bones,  
my bones, at your arrival, break.

And here you are.

Among contradictory angels you approach,  
pouring yourself like gentle music,  
like a glassful of unguents and aromas.

Por humilde me exaltas. Tu mirada,  
benévola, transforma  
mis llagas en ardientes esplendores.  
He aquí que te acercas y me encuentras  
rodenda de plegarias como de hogueras altas.

(Rosario Castellanos)

You praise my humility. Your gaze,  
benevolent, turns  
my wounds to fiery splendors.  
And now you draw near and find me  
surrounded by prayers as if by leaping flames.

(Rosario Castellanos)

#### **4. For with God nothing shall be impossible.**

“For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

(Luke 1)

#### **5. The babe leaped in her womb**

And Mary said, Behold the  
handmaid of the Lord; be it unto  
me according to thy word. And  
the angel departed from her.

And Mary arose in those days,  
and went into the hill country  
with haste, into a city of Juda;  
And entered the house of Zacharias,  
and saluted Elisabeth.

And it came to pass, that,  
when Elisabeth heard the salutation  
of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb;  
and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

And she spake out with a loud voice,  
and said, Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

For, lo, as soon as the voice  
of thy salutation sounded in mine  
ears, the babe leaped in my womb  
for joy.

And blessed is she that believed:  
for there shall be a performance  
of those things which  
were told her from the Lord.

(Luke 1)



## **6. Magnificat**

And Mary said,

My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced  
in God my Savior.  
For he hath regarded the low estate  
of his handmaiden; for, behold,  
from henceforth all generations  
shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;  
and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is on them  
that fear him from generation to generation.

He hath shown his strength with his arm;  
he hath scattered the proud.  
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,  
and exalted them of low degree.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things;  
and the rich he hath sent empty away.  
He hath helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy;

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham,  
and to his seed for ever.

(Luke 1)

## **7. Now she was sixteen years old**

Now she was sixteen years old when these strange events happened to her. It came to be the sixth month for her, and behold, Joseph came from his buildings; and he came into his house and found her pregnant.

He struck his face and threw himself to the ground. He wept bitterly, saying "Who is he who has deceived me? Who did this evil thing in my house and defiled her? Mary, why did you do this? Who is he who has deceived me?"

She wept bitterly, saying, "I am pure, and I do not know a man."

Joseph said to her. "Whence then is this which is in your womb?"

She said, "As the Lord my God lives, I do not know whence it came to me."

Gospel of James (adapted)

## 8. Joseph's Dream

Then Joseph feared greatly and stopped talking with her,  
considering what he would do.

Night came upon him:  
behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying:

Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee  
Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her  
is of the Holy Ghost.

Journey forth with her and be despised at the inns  
and stopping places on the way,  
even though you are worthy to ride in state  
in a chariot of gold.

The large houses and costly apartments will remain empty,  
but this comfort will remain hidden to you.  
Let Mary labor and give birth among the animals and beasts of burden—  
on a cold night, in a strange land and in a poor resting place.

And it shall come to pass that He  
shall give thee rest from they sorrow,  
and from they fear, and from the hard bondage  
wherein thou was made to serve.

(Gospel of James; Matthew 1; Martin Luther's Christmas Sermon; Isaiah 14:3)

## 9. Shake the Heavens

For thus saith the Lord:

Yet once, it is a little while,  
and I will shake the heavens,  
and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land:  
And I will shake all nations,  
and the desire of all nations shall come:  
and I will fill this house with glory  
and in this place I will give peace.

(Haggai 6-7; 9)

They drew near to Bethlehem—they were three miles distant—  
and Joseph turned and saw Mary weeping, and he said,  
“Probably that which is in her is distressing her.”  
Once again Joseph turned and saw her laughing,  
and he said, “Mary, how is it that I see your face



at one moment laughing and at another time gloomy?"  
She said to Joseph, "It is because I see two peoples  
with my eyes, the one weeping and mourning,  
the other rejoicing and glad."

(Gospel of James)

#### 10. Se habla de Gabriel

Como todos los huéspedes mi hijo me estorbaba  
ocupando un lugar que era mi lugar,  
existiendo a deshora,  
haciéndome partir en dos cada bocado.

Fea, enferma, aburrida  
lo sentía crecer a mis expensas,  
robarle su color a mi sangre, añadir  
un peso y un volumen clandestinos  
a mi modo de estar sobre la tierra.

Su cuerpo me pidió nacer, cederle el paso,  
darle un sitio en el mundo,  
la provisión de tiempo necesaria a su historia.

Consentí. Y por la herida en que partió, por esa  
hemorragia de su desprendimiento  
se fue también lo último que tuve  
de soledad, de yo mirando tras de un vidrio.

Quedé abierta, ofrecida  
a las visitas, al viento, a la presencia.

(Rosario Castellanos)

#### Speaking of Gabriel

Like all guests my son got in the way  
taking up a space that was my space,  
existing at all the wrong times,  
making me divide each bite in two.

Ugly, sick, bored,  
I felt him grow at my expense,  
steal the color from my blood, add  
clandestine weight and volume  
to my way of being on the earth.

His body begged for birth, begged me to let him pass,  
allot him his place in the world  
and the portion of time he needed for his history.

I agreed. And through the wound of his departure,  
through the hemorrhage of his breaking free,  
the last I ever felt of solitude, of myself  
looking through a pane of glass, also slipped away.

I was left open, an offering  
to visitations, to the wind, to presence.

(Rosario Castellanos)

#### 10a. Now I, Joseph, was walking about (coda of "Se habla de Gabriel")

Now I, Joseph, was walking about,  
and I looked up and saw the heaven standing still,  
and I observed the air in amazement  
and the birds of heaven at rest.  
I looked down at the earth,  
and I saw a vessel lying there,  
and workmen reclining,  
and their hands were in the vessel.  
Those who were chewing did not chew.  
Those who were lifting did not lift up,  
and those who were carrying to their mouths  
did not carry,

but all faces were looking up.

I saw sheep standing still,  
and the shepherd raised his hand to strike them,  
but his arm remained up.

I observed the streaming river,  
and I saw the mouths of the kids at the water,  
but they were not drinking.

The winds stopped, they made no sound;  
there was no motion of tree leaves.  
The streams did not flow;  
there was no motion of the sea.

The maiden stood looking intently  
into heaven.

(Gospel of James; Latin Infancy Gospel)

### 11. The Christmas Star

A little girl  
comes running,  
she caught and carries a star.  
She goes flying, making the plants  
and animals she passes  
bend with fire.

Her hands already sizzle,  
she tires, wavers, stumbles,  
and falls headlong,  
but she gets right up with it again.

Her hands don't burn away,  
nor does the star break apart,  
although her face, arms,  
chest and hair are on fire.

She burns down to her waist.  
People shout at her  
and she won't let it go;  
her hands are covered with burns  
but she won't release the star.

Oh how she sows its seeds  
as it hums and flies.  
They try to take it away—  
but how can she live  
without her star?



It didn't simply fall—it didn't.  
It remained without her,  
and now she runs without a body,  
changed, transformed into ashes.

The road catches fire  
and our braids burn,  
and now we all receive her  
because the entire Earth is burning.

(Gabriela Mistral)

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**11a. O quam preciosa**  
(interpolated in The Christmas Star)

O quam preciosa est virginitas  
virginis huius  
que clausam portam habet,  
et cuius viscera  
sancta divinitas calore suo  
infudit,  
ita quod flos in ea crevit.

Et filius Dei  
per secreta ipsius  
quasi aurora exivit.

Unde dulce germen,  
quod Filius ipse est,  
per clausuram ventris eius  
paradisum aperuit.

Et Filius Dei  
per secreta ipsius  
quasi aurora exivit.

(Hildegard von Bingen)

**O quam preciosa**  
(English translation)

O how precious is the virginity  
of this virgin  
whose gate is closed,  
and whose womb  
holy divinity infused  
with his warmth,  
so that a flower grew in her.

And the Son of God  
through her secret passage  
came forth like the dawn.

Thus the tender shoot  
which is her Son,  
opened paradise  
through the enclosure  
of her womb.  
And the Son of Man  
through her secret passage  
came forth like the dawn.

(Hildegard von Bingen)

### 12. Pues mi Dios ha nacido a penar

1—Pues mi Dios ha nacido a penar,  
déjenle velar.

2—Pues está desvelado por mí,  
déjenle dormir.

1—Déjenle velar,  
que no hay pena, en quien ama,  
como no penar.

2—Déjenle dormir,  
que quien duerme, en el sueño  
se ensaya a morir.

1—Silencio, que duerme.

2—Cuidado, que vela.

1—¡No le despierten, no!

2—¡Si le despierten, sí!

1—¡Déjenle velar!

2—¡Déjenle dormir!

(Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz)

### Because my Lord was born to suffer

1—Because my Lord was born to suffer,  
let him stay awake.

2—Because for me he is awake,  
let him sleep.

1—Let him stay awake,  
for there is no pain for one who loves  
as painlessness would be.

2—Let him sleep,  
for one who sleeps, in dreaming,  
prepares himself to die.

1—Silence, now he sleeps!

2—Careful, he's awake!

1—Do not disturb him, no!

2—Yes, he must be waked!

1—Let him stay awake!

2—Let him sleep!

(Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz)

### 13. When Herod heard

Now when Jesus was born in  
Bethlehem of Judaea,  
in the days of Herod, the king, behold,  
there came wise men from the east  
to Jerusalem, saying,

Where is he that is born King of the Jews?  
for we have seen his star in the east,  
and are come to worship him.

Now when Herod had heard these things,  
he was troubled, and he privily called the wise men,  
inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.  
And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

Go and search diligently for the young child,  
and when you have found him  
bring me word again, that I may come  
and worship him also.

(Matthew 2)

#### **14. Woe unto them that call evil good**

Woe unto them that call evil good,  
and good evil; that put darkness for light,  
and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter!

Woe unto them that are wise  
in their own eyes, and prudent in  
their own sight!

Woe unto them that seek deep  
to hide their counsel from the Lord,  
and their works are in the dark,  
and they say, Who seeth us?  
and who knoweth us?

I also will choose their delusions,  
and will bring their fears upon them.

(Isaiah 5; 29; 66 )

#### **15. And the star went before them**

When they had heard the king, they departed:  
and lo, the star, which they saw in the east,  
went before them, till it came and stood over  
where the young child was.  
And when they were come into the house,  
they saw the young child with Mary his mother,  
and fell down, and worshipped him,  
and when they had opened their treasures,  
they presented unto him gifts;  
gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

(Matthew 2)

#### **16. The Three Kings**

"I am Gaspar. I have brought frankincense,  
and I have come here to say that life is good.  
That God exists. Tha love is everything.  
I know it is so because of the heavenly star."

"I am Melchior. I have brought fragrant myrrh.  
Yes, God exists. He is the light of day.



The whitest flower is rooted in the mud,  
and all delights are tinged with melancholy.”

“I am Balthasar. I have brought gold.  
I assure you, God exists. He is great and strong.  
I know it is so because of the perfect star  
that shines so brightly in Death’s diadem.”

“Gaspar, Melchior, Balthasar: be still.  
Christ, reborn, turns chaos into light,  
and on His brow He wears the Crown of Life.”

(Rubén Darío)

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### 17. And when they were departed

And when they were departed,  
behold, the angel of the Lord  
appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying,

Arise, and take the young child and his mother,  
and flee into Egypt, and be thou there  
until I bring thee word:  
for Herod will seek the young child  
to destroy him.

(Matthew 2)

### 18. Dawn Air

My soul’s above the sea and whistling a dream  
Tell the shepherds the wind is saddling its horse  
And waving as it leaves in the pride of its youth  
I love a woman proud and dreamlike  
Silent stepping out from her center  
Shepherds know that you should watch me  
And watch you dreams and watch your songs  
And the dance of the waves  
Like the joy of their pride and beauty

Ah sky blue for the queen in the wind  
Ah herd of goats and white hair  
Lips of praise and red hair  
Animals lost in her eyes  
Speak to the skeleton combing its hair  
From the tip of the earth to the end of the ages  
Tunic and scepter

Amplification of memories  
Sound of insects and highways  
Speak of the land as the ocean flows  
Ah the wind  
The wind stops for the queen who steps out from her sky

(Vicente Huidobro)

**19. And the star went before them**

When they had heard the king, they departed:  
and lo, the star, which they saw in the east,  
went before them, till it came and stood over  
where the young child was.  
And when they were come into the house,  
they saw the young child, with Mary his mother,  
and fell down, and worshipped him  
and when they had opened their treasures,  
they presented unto him gifts;  
gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

(Matthew 2)

## 20. Memorial de Tlatelolco

La oscuridad engendra la violencia  
y la violencia pide oscuridad  
para cuajar en crimen.

Por eso el dos de octubre aguardó hasta la noche  
para que nadie viera la mano que empuñaba  
el arma, sino sólo su efecto de relámpago.

Y a esa luz, breve y lívida, ¿quien? ¿Quién es el  
que máta?

¿Quiénes los que agonizan, los que mueren?

¿Los que huyen sin zapatos?

¿Los que van a caer al pozo de una cárcel?

¿Los que se pudren en el hospital?

¿Los que se quedan mudos, para siempre, de  
espanto?

¿Quién? ¿Quiénes? Nadie. Al día siguiente, nadie.

La plaza amaneció barrida; los periodicos  
dieron como noticia principal  
el estado del tiempo.

Y en la televisión, en la radio, en el cine  
no hubo ningún cambio de programa,  
ningún anuncio intercalado ni un  
minuto de silencio en el banquete.  
(Pues prosiguió el banquete.)

No busques lo que no hay: huellas, cadáveres,  
que todo se le ha dado como ofrenda a una diosa:  
a la Devoradora de Excrementos.

No hurgues en los archivos pues nada consta en  
actas.

Ay, la violencia pide oscuridad  
porque la oscuridad engendra el sueño  
y podemos dormir soñando que soñamos.

Mas he aquí que toco una llaga: es mi memoria.  
Duele, luego es verdad. Sangra con sangre.  
Y si la llamo mía traiciono a todos.

Recuerdo, recordamos.

Esta es nuestra manera de ayudar que amanezca  
sobre tantas conciencias mancilladas,  
sobre un texto iracundo, sobre una reja abierta,  
sobre el rostro amparado tras la máscara.

## 20. Memorandum on Tlatelolco

Darkness engenders violence  
and violence demands darkness  
to coagulate in crime.

That is why October the second waited until night  
so that no one might see the hand that clutched  
the weapon, but only its flash in the dark.

And in that light, brief and livid, who? Who is he  
who kills?

Who are they that are in agony? Who are dying?

Who are they that flee without shoes?

Those who will be thrown into prison?

Those who will rot in the hospital?

Who are those who will forever remain mute out of  
fear?

Who? Who? No one. On the following day, no one.

Dawn broke on the plaza cleanly swept; the newspapers  
spoke of the weather  
as their main story.

And on the television, on the radio, and in the cinema  
there was no change of program,  
no interrupting news bulletin nor even  
a minute of silence at the banquet.  
(And so the banquet proceeded.)

Don't search for that which is not there; clues, corpses,  
for everything has been given up as offering to a goddess:  
to the Devourer of Excrement.

Don't sift through the archives because nothing has  
been recorded there.

Ah, violence demands darkness  
because darkness engenders the dream  
and we can sleep dreaming that we can dream.

But here I touch an open wound: it is my memory.  
It hurts, therefore it is true. It bleeds real blood.  
And if I call it mine I betray everyone.

I remember. We remember.

This is our way of helping the dawn to break  
upon so many stained consciences,  
upon an angry text, upon an open grate,  
upon the face shielded behind the mask.



Recuerdo, recordemos  
hasta que la justicia se siente entre nosotros.

(Rosario Castellanos)

I remember. We must remember  
until justice be done among us.

(Rosario Castellanos)

## **21. In the day of the great slaughter**

And there shall be upon every  
high mountain, and upon every  
high hill, rivers and streams of  
waters in the day of the great  
slaughter, when the towers fall.

---

The light of the  
moon shall be as the light of the  
sun, and the light of the sun shall  
be sevenfold, as the light of seven  
days, in the day that the Lord  
bindeth up the breach of his people,  
and healeth the stroke of  
their wound.

(Isaiah 30)

## 22. Pues está tiritando

1—Pues está tiritando  
amor en el hielo,  
y la escarcha y la nieve  
me lo tienen preso,  
¿quién le acude?

2—¡El agua!

3—¡La tierra!

4—¡El aire!

1—¡No, sino el fuego!

1—Pues al niño fatigan  
sus penas y males,  
y a sus ansias no dudo  
que alientos le faltan,  
¿quién le acude?

2—¡El fuego!

3—¡La tierra!

4—¡El agua!

1—¡No, sino el aire!

1—Pues el niño amoroso  
tan tierno se abrasa,  
que respira en volcanes  
diluvios de llamas,  
¿quién le acude?

2—¡El aire!

3—¡El fuego!

4—¡La tierra!

1—¡No, sino el agua!

1—Si por la tierra el niño  
los cielos hoy deja,  
y no halla en qué descansa  
su cabeza en ella,  
¿quién le acude?

2—¡El agua!

3—¡El fuego!

4—¡El aire!

1—¡No, mas la tierra!

(Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz)

## Since Love is shivering

1--Since Love is shivering  
in the icy cold,  
and frost and snow  
have imprisoned him from me,  
who will come to his aid?

1—Water!

2—Earth!

3—Air!

1—No, but fire will!

1—Since the child is burdened  
with pains and ills  
and doubtless  
his anguish leaves him breathless,  
who will come to his aid?

1—Fire!

2—Earth!

3—Water!

1—No, but the air will!

1—Since the tender, loving child  
burns so ardently  
that he breathes out flames  
like a volcano erupting,  
who will come to his aid?

1—Air!

2—Fire!

3—Earth!

1—No, but water will!

1—Since on this day the  
child has left heaven for earth  
and can find here  
no place to rest his head,  
who will come to his aid?

1—Water!

2—Fire!

3—Earth!

1—No, but the earth will!

(Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz)

## 23. Jesus and the Dragons

They came to a certain cave and wanted to rest in it. Mary held Jesus in her lap. There were three boys traveling with Joseph and a girl with Mary. And behold, suddenly, many dragons came out of the cave. When the boys saw them in front of them they shouted with great fear.

Then Jesus got down from his mother's lap, and stood on his feet before the dragons. They, however, worshipped him, and while they worshipped him they backed away.

Then the infant Jesus walked before them and ordered them not to harm any man. But Mary and Joseph were very afraid lest the child should be harmed by the dragons.

Jesus said to them: "Do not be afraid, nor consider me a child; I always have been a perfect man and am so now."

(Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew)

## **24. The Palm Tree**

And so it happened, that on the third day after their departure, Mary was fatigued by the heat of the sun in the desert and, seeing a palm tree, said to Joseph, "I want to rest a bit under its shadow." Joseph quickly led her to the palm and let her get down from the animal. While Mary sat, she looked up at the top of the palm and saw it full of fruit. She said to Joseph, "I wish that I might have some fruit from this tree."

Joseph said "I am astonished that you say this when you see how high this palm tree is. You think to eat from the fruit of the palm, but it is not possible. I think more of the lack of water, which already fails us. We now have nothing by which we can refresh ourselves and the animals."

Then the infant Jesus, who was resting with smiling face on his mother's lap, said to the palm tree, "Bend down, tree, and refresh my mother with your fruit."

And, at this voice, the palm tree bent down its head to the feet of Mary, and they gathered its fruit, and all were refreshed.

Then Jesus said to it, "Raise up, palm, and be strong, and be a companion of my trees which are in my Father's Paradise. Open a water course beneath your roots which is hidden in the earth, and from it let flow waters to satisfy us."

And the palm raised itself at once, and fountains of water, very clear and cold and wet, began to pour out through the roots.

(Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew)



**24a. Una palmera**

Señora de los vientos,  
garza de la llanura,  
cuando te meces canta  
tu cintura.

Gesto de la oración  
o preludio del vuelo,  
en tu copa se vierten uno a uno  
los cielos.

Desde el país oscuro de los hombres  
he venido, a mirarte, de rodillas.  
Alta, desnuda, única.  
Poesía.

(Rosario Castellanos)

**A Palm Tree**

Lady of the winds,  
heron of the plains,  
when you sway  
your waist sings.

Gesture of prayer  
or prelude of wings,  
you are the cup into which the skies  
pour one by one.

From the dark land of men  
I've come kneeling to admire you.  
Tall, naked, alone.  
A poem.

(Rosario Castellanos)



# SHOW

ENTERTAINMENT NEWS, REVIEWS AND PERSONALITIES

## 'Nixon in China': Opera's next wave

By David Patrick Stearns  
USA TODAY

Richard Nixon couldn't play piano very well, much less star in a grand opera. But the Nixon who exists in the imaginations of director Peter Sellars and composer John Adams may become the most talked-about opera character since Madame Butterfly.

The opera, *Nixon in China*, is exactly what the title promises. Currently staged by the Houston Grand Opera (through Nov. 7), it portrays Nixon's historic, 1972 visit to China, with Nixon shaking lots of hands, Pat Nixon touring a pig farm and Mao Tse-Tung muttering enigmatic aphorisms. Like *60 Minutes*, only sung.

Why Nixon? Why Mao? Why Henry Kissinger? "If I said I was writing an opera about Ulysses, people would yawn and forget about it," Adams says. "But everyone has a very complex set of emotions on these characters."

The opera is also generating interest because the collaborators are young turks in their fields — so hot that before the opera premiered, the Next

Wave Festival in Brooklyn decided to present it (Dec. 4-17), PBS-TV laid plans to broadcast it next spring, and Nonesuch Records arranged to record it.

The controversial Sellars is the most talked-about director in the USA. Adams is becoming the most popular USA orchestral composer since Aaron Copland. *The Chairman Dances*, a ballet sequence written for the opera but premiered last year, has had seven performances by major orchestras in the past year. A recording of it is No. 11 on *Billboard's* classical chart.

The idea for *Nixon in China* simply came to Sellars a few years ago, and at first Adams thought it was ridiculous. But opera composers of the past put contemporary celebrities in their operas — or at least thinly disguised versions of them — so why not?

Plus, the nature of the story offered a clean break from hoary operatic conventions. "Nobody drank poison or was even betrayed," Adams says. "There's no plot, no narrative topic. But just the contrast between the two women, Pat Nixon and Madame Mao ... it's



By Victor Arimondi

**ADAMS:** He hopes to create more contemporary operas.

theatrical dynamic."

"It ends up in that field of very rich ambiguity," Sellars says. "A lot of operas come out and disappear without a trace. This one, I think, will be around for a while. We'll hear excerpts in concerts. In auditions, people will be singing (Mao's aria) *We No Longer Need Confucious*."

Even though the opera received wildly mixed reaction at an unorchestrated concert performance in San Francisco in May, both Adams and Sellars are bent on creating more operas, maybe an entire repertoire of operas, based on contemporary subjects.

"The only thing to do is replenish the opera repertoire so we can really say the 1990s was one of the great periods of flowering in opera," Sellars says. "All we need to do is get people away from their compact discs of Joan Sutherland; then we'll be talking!"

## Unpredictable out a doc

By Iain Blair  
Special for USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — The huge cult following they've built up over eight years isn't even grousing: R.E.M. finally has broken through to the top 20.

With *Document* (I.R.S.), the band's fifth and most accessible album, R.E.M. has hit the pop jackpot, skyrocketing to No. 12 on *Billboard's* chart. The first single, the confident and catchy *The One I Love*, is headed for the top 20, too.

But the band is characteristically wary of its sudden mainstream triumph. "As far as I'm concerned, we've been successful for years — since we quit our day jobs," says bassist Mike Mills. "We wouldn't know how to be mainstream. People have accused us of trying to be obscure, when we were aiming to be subtle."

From the start, when singer Michael Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck, drummer Bill Perry and Mills met as students at the University of Georgia, they've broken the rules. They released their first single, 1980's *Radio Free Europe*, by themselves, then toured the USA without an album release or record-label support.

But their independent and committed stance paid off when the band, based in Athens, Ga. (they still live there), was signed by I.R.S. The label sensibly encouraged R.E.M. to follow its best instincts on such quirkily titled albums as 1985's *Fables of the Reconstruction* (or *Reconstruction of the Fables*, depending on which side of the cover is up) and last year's *Lifes Rich Pageant*.

The latter was hailed as the group's breakthrough — at least in intelligibility. Stipe had muttered and mumbled his way through much of the band's first three albums (the first was titled *Murmur*). But on *Document*, he really sings, even if his dense, allusive lyrics remain enigmatic (some would say on purpose).

Not so, Stipe says. "To me, the words have always been listenable and understandable. It's just people not knowing how to listen."

They're learning how now. The taut, polished *Document* sparkles with edgy pop appeal.

## A musical stunner in the rough

HOUSTON — *Nixon in China* might be better titled *Nixon in the Ozone*.

A few minutes into the Houston Grand Opera's production of the Peter Sellars-John Adams opera, it's clear that the 1972 summit is only a framework for a symbolic drama. Despite its unevenness, this is the most humane, intriguing and entrancing new opera in years.

China becomes an alternately ethereal and brutal dream world lorded over by the enigmatic Mao Tse-Tung and misanthropic Madame Mao. Richard and Pat Nixon, representing the USA's con-

### MUSIC

DAVID PATRICK STEARNS

sciousness, weather various bizarre adventures and rediscover their humanity.

That's an elusive concept, but James Maddalena convincingly portrays Nixon's evolution from a vain politician to a fledgling "new age" socialist — with lots of help from Adams' music. Conducted by John DeMain, Adams' score has arid patches, yet it has a strong, attractive personality and is layered with meaning. Sometimes it's sublime.

Unfortunately, neither Sellars' tentative staging nor Adrienne Lobel's representational sets hint much at the internal drama so richly apparent in the music. The singers seem unsure whether to play it straight or satirical.

Such problems aren't surprising: All parties concerned are trying to reinvent opera and can't be expected to do that in one brilliant stroke. But there are at least two more chances after this run ends Nov. 7 — in December at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and in March at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center.





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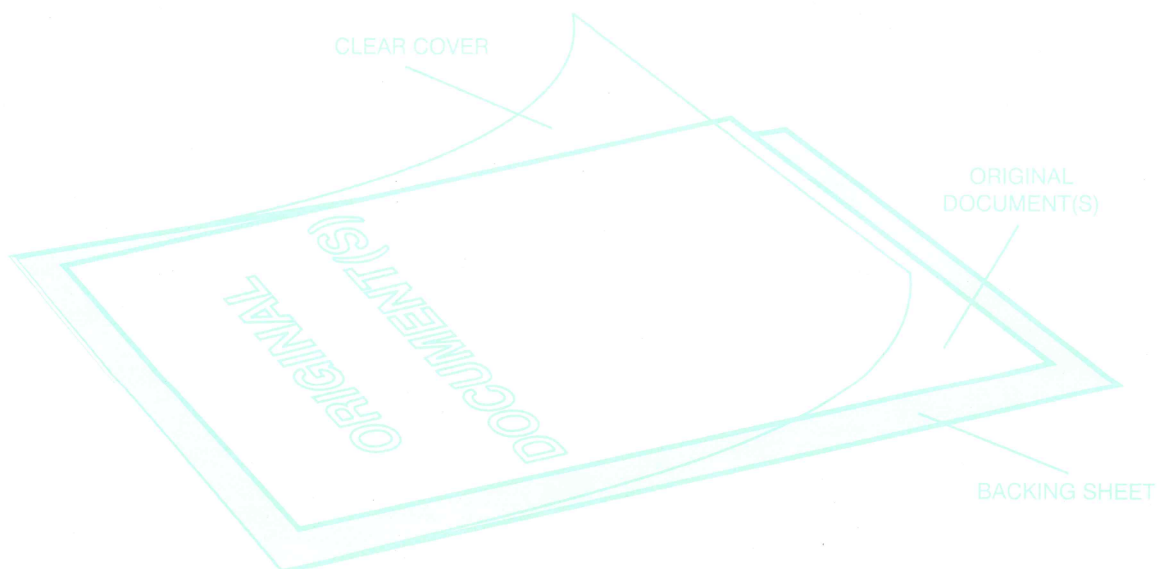
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## MINIMALIST MUSH

# NIXON GOES TO CHINA VIA OPERA IN S.F.

By MARTIN BERNHEIMER,  
*Times Music Critic*

**S**AN FRANCISCO—Richard Nixon eyes Mao Zedong nervously, sweats profusely, thinks of his place in history and sings an aria. It is a high baritone aria full of shallow, well-meant platitudes.

The Chinese Chairman receives his guest with quizzical civility compromised by sly bemusement and sings an aria of his own. It is a

high Heldentenor aria full of mystical philosophical references.

And so it goes. This is the *Imperial City in 1972*, or a deliriously unreasonable facsimile thereof.

Pat Nixon spouts giddy petit-bourgeois homilies as well as lyric-soprano cliché-fragments, weeps for the downtrodden and waltzes with her sentimentality-prone husband. *+ fullness*

Mme. Mao does some vamping, musing and waltzing of her own, amid daring coloratura flights and gusts of Wagnerian resolve.

Henry Kissinger, a basso-not-so-profondo, provides comic relief. Premier Zhou Enlai sings a symbol-laden soliloquy with something akin to a probing if inscrutable voice of baritonal reason. Choruses of various sizes add Orffian punctuation to the multifarious verbal encounters.

This bizarre but potentially beguiling concoction is "Nixon in China," a pseudo-historic quasi-satirical opera-in-progress by everybody's favorite romantic minimalist, John Adams. (Remember "Harmonielehre"?)

With two intermissions and glib explanatory remarks by the composer himself, "Nixon" ran—sometimes crept—for three and a half trying hours Friday night at the Herbst Theater.

At this so-called "concert preview," the audience in the 1,100-seat hall shrank dramatically as the evening rambled on. That need not suggest a lost cause, however. Things could be very different by the time "Nixon" receives its much-ballyhooed full-scale premiere at the new Wortham Theatre in Houston in October (with reprises to follow in Brooklyn, Washing-

*Please see 'NIXON,' Page 6*

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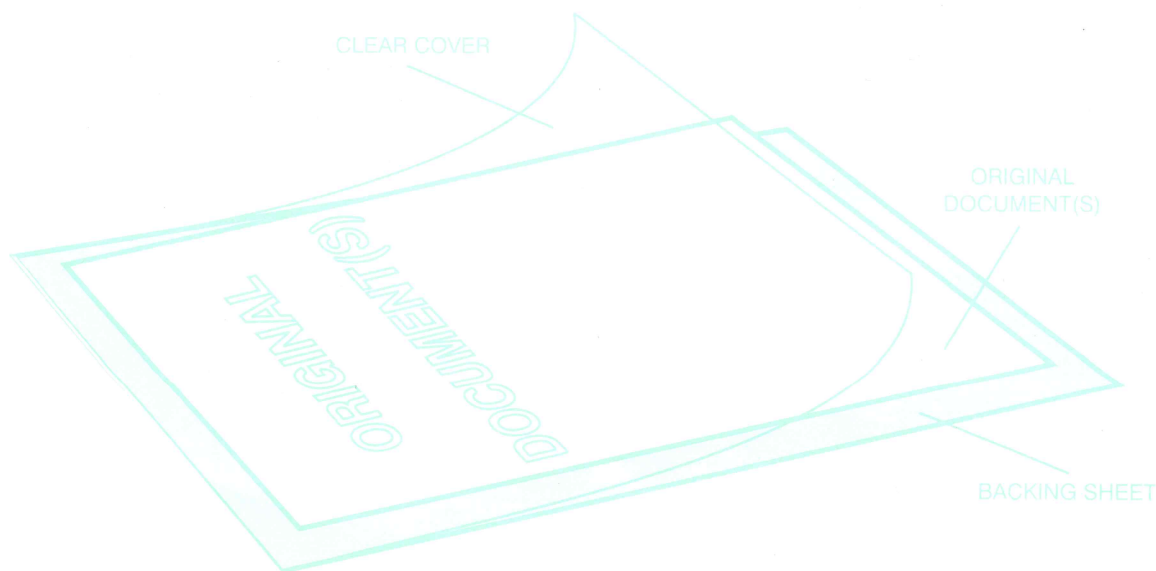
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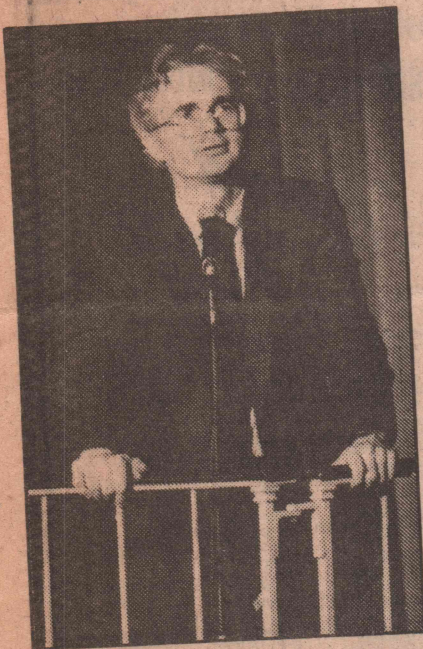


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JEFF REINKING

John Adams, left, introduces his opera. Carolann Page and James Maddalena sing the Nixons.

## 'NIXON'

Continued from Page 1  
ton and Amsterdam).

When finally staged, the opera will no doubt benefit from the theatrical imagination of Peter Sellars, the fashionable *enfant terrible* who happened to conceive the project in the first place. Mark Morris, another avant-gardish *Wunderkind*, will no doubt provide off-the-Great-Wall choreography, including a heart-rending ballet *divertissement* inspired by "The Red Detachment of Women."

By October, the opera should be adorned with bona-fide orchestral accompaniment. The singers, for better or worse, will be outfitted with body mikes.

It all will be terribly daring, terribly mod, terribly chic, terribly up-to-date. It also may be provocative. It may even be fun.

The embryonic San Francisco version, sponsored by American Inroads in lieu of the defunct San Francisco Concert Opera, was just a sketchy token. The singers stood around and read the score from music stands. There were no sets, no costumes. There was no action.

The accompaniment was reduced—if that is the right verb—to two pianos and a synthesizer.

It is possible, though unlikely, that Adams will make major changes in his magnum opus before the autumn. Even if he does, he won't change his basic language, which is predicated on lush push-button sonorities, pretty second-hand effects, repetitive twaddle, rhythmic hyper-monotony and primitive piffle.

If one listens to the music without the advantage of dramatic distractions, it is possible to find sporadic passages that are genuinely engaging. Unfortunately, these passages are mired in somnolent sequential rituals that give *ostinatos* and *arpeggios* bad names.

Adams can crank out amusing movie-music bilge for satirical effect when he wants to. He obviously enjoys having his way with the mock-melodramatic gesture. He can burlesque operatic convention as well as the next fellow, and he does manage to use nice *Sprechgesang* explorations as counterpoint for his doodled-doodled instrumental meanderings.

If only it weren't all so simplistic. Compounding the inherent stylistic problems, Adams has chosen

to tread a precarious line between caricature and pathos. Ultimately, he falters. And falters. And falters.

Alice Goodman's libretto is often elegant and sometimes eloquent. As such it poses the threat of contextual shock.

The performance, stoically conducted by John DeMain, enlisted a stalwart little local chorus and most of the cast that will sing the Houston premiere.

James Maddalena understated Nixon's callow, shallow and shifty excesses sensitively. Carolann Page emerged terminally demure as his Pat. John Duykers as Mao and Sanford Sylvan as Zhou Enlai served as sympathetic exotics. Trude Ellen Craney exuded steely sex appeal, even in florid flight and expletive verbal indulgence, as Mme. Mao.

Ronald Gerard, the modest, low-toned Kissinger, is not scheduled to repeat his relatively thankless assignment deep in the heart of Texas. A new singing statesman already has, no doubt, been cast. Under the circumstances, one left this complex and lofty endeavor haunted by only one profound question.

One wondered who's Kissinger now.





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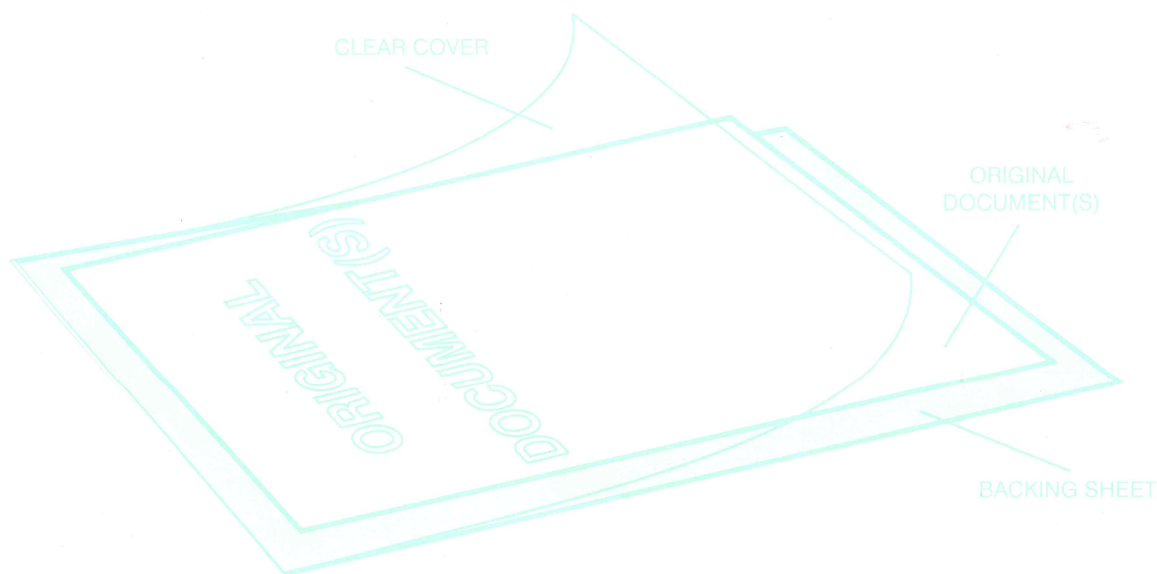
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# 'Nixon in China' receives impressive world premiere

By CARL CUNNINGHAM  
Post Music Editor

In strange ways, analogies to the spirit of Richard Wagner's operas, as well as parodies of them, seem to have survived in the music of American composer John Adams, whose pretentious, satiric, bombastic, philosophic, psychological, sensational new opera, *Nixon in China*, received an impressive world premiere by Houston Grand Opera Thursday at Wortham Center.

## Opera Review

The music of Adams' new opera on Richard Nixon's historic 1972 meeting with Mao Tse-tung pulsates to the relentless beat of the minimalist musical tradition, the jazzy syncopations and the wind/brass colors of a swing band, far from the soundscape of Wagner's works. Its wind-dominated orchestration is also fastidiously tinted with the metallic patina of an electronic synthesizer.

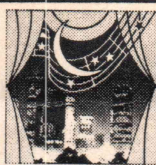
But the immense scale of his musical forms, his attempt to turn historical leaders into mythic heroes — and sometimes even the musical figuration and big washes of orchestral tone — all call to mind the music of Wagner.

Adams' predilection for building whole arias, choruses and lengthy blocks of music out of little cells of harmony, rhythm or melody is remotely analogous to the Wagnerian leading-motive technique, where a thematic motto becomes a musical building block.

And depending upon one's point of view, the opera's static musical attributes give Adams' *Nixon in China* a Wagnerian pace that is either timelessly hypnotic — or endlessly repetitive. Having attended Tuesday's dress rehearsal as well as Thursday's premiere, plus two concert previews of the opera last May in San Francisco, I was occasionally hypnotized at the dress rehearsal, but more frequently undecieved at Thursday's premiere.

Adams' music and orchestration mesh skillfully with Alice Goodman's epigrammatic libretto, which is a remarkable accomplishment for a first effort at opera. It has some wonderfully expressive arias for Chou En-lai and a very chilling, psychologically probing final scene, but the bulk of the musical

## Overnight In Houston



### HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

World premiere of John Adams' *Nixon in China* Thursday evening, with repetitions at 2 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Oct. 31, Nov. 3, 5 and 7 in Brown Theater, Wortham Center. Libretto by Alice Goodman. Conducted by John DeMain, staged by Peter Sellars, sets by Adrienne Lobel, costumes by Dunya Ramkova, lighting by James Ingalls, chorus prepared by Conoley Ballard, choreography by Mark Morris. Cast: Sanford Sylvan: (Chou En-lai); James Maddalena (Richard Nixon); Thomas Hammons (Henry Kissinger/Lau Szu); John Duykers (Mao Tse-tung); Carolann Page (Pat Nixon); Trudy Ellen Craney (Madame Mao); Mari Opatz, Stephanie Friedman, Marlon Dry (Mao's secretaries). Dancers: Steven Ochoa (Hung Ch'ang-ch'ing, Heather Toma (Wu Ching-hua).

score is more keenly effective than deeply inspiring. And too often, there is not enough valid content to warrant the huge scale of the piece.

But Adams' music has telling vocal characterizations of an egocentric, paranoid Richard Nixon, an arrogant, short-tempered Mao, a humbly philosophic Chou, a sweetly simple-minded Pat Nixon and a stridently feminist, but vulnerable, lonely Madame Mao. The opera also builds steadily to long climaxes, especially during a thrilling first-act finale that ends with sheets of choral tone.

Adams' insistent use of repetitive speech patterns is another very effective device, but one that harks back to the operas of Czech composer Leos Janacek, rather than Wagner's operas. And one often hears nervous Stravinskyian rhythms in this setting of vocal lines, as well.

In some respects, the scenic/dramatic aspects of the production almost go against the epic grain of the story, in the two-dimensional, sometimes cartoon-like simplicity of Adrienne Lobel's designs and Peter Sellars' staging.

A flat cutout of the presidential plane drops straight down from the scene loft onto the Beijing airport tarmac, then is lifted up when no longer needed. The Ming Tombs similarly descend in the hazy sunset, while beds, classroom desks, hospital gurneys, shop fronts and pigpens are quickly wheeled on and off the bare stage, as Pat Nixon goes touring with her Chinese

hosts.

Sellars' staging portrays an emotionless, regimented, two-dimensional society in China of the 1970s, with choruses of Communist functionaries standing in long rows or bowing stiffly in shapeless Mao suits. A feeble Mao labors onstage like a puppet, supported by three secretaries who then mimic his stiff gestures during the first-act conference scene.

But Sellars' zest for controversy and sensationalism shows its truest colors in the opera's viciously satirical fifth scene, which is an ill-disguised character assassination of Henry Kissinger.

As a climax to several demeaning, unflattering references to Nixon's secretary of state elsewhere in the opera, bass Thomas Hammons, who sings Kissinger's role, is double-cast as a sadistic, lustful Chinese official who fondles a chained slave girl and orders her brutally whipped in Madame Mao's feminist revolutionary pantomime, *The Red Detachment of Women*.

This pantomime ballet, set to seething, crudely bombastic, sometimes parodistic music by Adams, has been given very athletic, melodramatic choreography by Mark Morris. It has everything but the kitchen sink: a whipping dance, female banana-picker and rifle-drill choruses, even a sly jibe at an orange juice commercial, set to some American pop-music close harmony and a snippet lifted from Wagner's Ring cycle.

The chaotic ballet ends with Nixon breaking into the granary to distribute rice, while the Kissinger-look-alike landlord is overthrown, after some extraordinary tumbling and stage-fall feats by singer Hammons.

Thursday's premiere was studied with fine vocal-dramatic characterizations, especially from Sanford Sylvan, whose strong lyric singing brought deeply expressive values to the two beautiful arias Adams wrote for the low tenor role of Chou En-lai at the end of each act.

Baritone James Maddalena displayed a bright, clear tone and excellent enunciation in the role of Nixon. John Duykers showed amazing endurance in the cruelly high-pitched heroic tenor role of Mao and lyric soprano Carolann Page produced a strong, appealing tone in Pat Nixon's long aria at the



John Duykers, portraying M

beginning of Act Two.

Soprano Trudy Ellen Craney was impressive in the high-lying arias for Madame Mao and then gave a telling vocal/dramatic portrayal of the yearning, unloved woman in the opera's lonely, psychological revealing final scene. Hammons showed a strong, incisive tone in the snarling, ungrateful vocal role given to the Kissinger/Chinese landlord character.

The Houston Grand Opera chorus sang cleanly and impressively and the small orchestra played Adams' iridescent score magnificently under the brilliant conducting of John DeMain. Now has the herculean double duty of conducting this opera on alternate nights with Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* across the way in Wortham Center's Culbertson Theater.

# Journalist manages a smile in recalling

Houston journalist Gary Taylor — known worldwide now that People magazine favorably compared one of his love affairs to the crowd-pleaser in the movie *Fatal Attraction* — isn't entirely appreciative of the woman who helped him earn enough fame to be asked on *The Oprah*

night they made love on the beach," is the way People put it.

Much like actor Michael Douglas in *Fatal Attraction*, Gary soon found himself involved with a woman who wouldn't leave him alone even though he told her nicely to get lost several times. Although

"One time one of her clients jumped bond and she wanted me to go with her to get him. She also got another guy who had a gun and he went around to the back door. She told me to stand at the front step and then handed me a big knife. She said, 'If he comes out this way, you know

Har





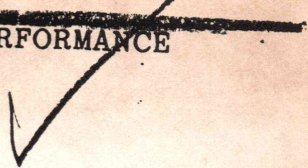




# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE...

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AMERICAN INROADS TO PRESENT CONCERT PREVIEW PERFORMANCE  
OF JOHN ADAMS' OPERA "NIXON IN CHINA"  
MAY 21 & 22 AT HERBST THEATRE



SAN FRANCISCO (1 May 1987) --- American Inroads has undertaken the presentation of the concert preview performances of John Adams' much-discussed new opera "Nixon in China" from San Francisco Concert Opera, it was announced today. This first ever public performance of "Nixon in China" will be presented as originally scheduled May 21 & 22, 8:00 pm, at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre with generous support from the Mortimer Fleishhacker Foundation, and additional funding from the San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund. San Francisco Concert Opera had planned to present "Nixon in China" as its season finale, but financial concerns forced its board to consider cancellation, until American Inroads agreed to assume responsibility for the presentation.

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Conceived by stage director Peter Sellars with libretto by Alice Goodman, Adams' opera has already ignited national attention and is expected to be the hottest and possibly most controversial opera of the decade. The opera tells the story of Richard Nixon's 1972 historic presidential visit to Peking and his meeting there with Chairman Mao Tse-tung. This workshop concert will afford local audiences the very rare opportunity of hearing a preview of a new opera in the making.

-MORE-







# Nixon—the Opera?

*Local composer John Adams proves that opera can be a hot property.*

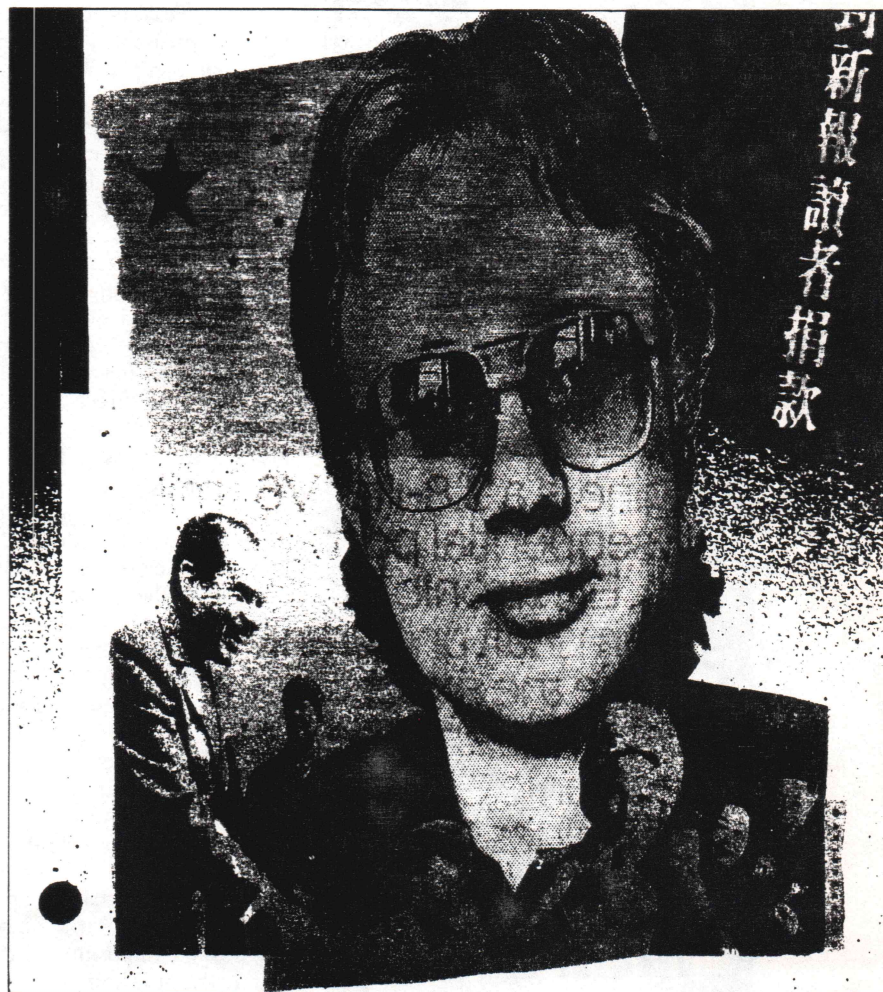
**Y**OU REMEMBER OPERA, DON'T YOU? Portly middle-aged gentlemen in leather sarongs and sandals pretending they're the epitome of adolescent virility. Matronly sopranos feigning consumptive postures. Bored choristers eyeing the orchestra pit while trying to convince you they're Sicilian villagers or ancient Egyptian warriors.

Composer John Adams remembers opera that way, too. Which is why his first attempt at music theatre will be about something else altogether. It will be called *Nixon in China*. It will concern the former president's historic three-day visit to Beijing in 1972. It will involve the collaborative talents of esteemed poet Alice Goodman, wunderkind director Peter Sellars and the brilliant young choreographer Mark Morris. And it will be one of three productions inaugurating the Houston Grand Opera's new Wortham Theatre Center in October. Houston will be followed by performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, in February and the Holland Festival in Amsterdam in June 1988.

*Nixon in China* should be the hottest, most avidly discussed opera of the next few years, and the Bay Area, where Adams now lives, will get the first peek at the completed score when Concert Opera Association presents two concert previews May 21st and 22nd at 8:00 p.m. at the Herbst Theatre. The event will feature principals of the Houston cast (John Duykers, James Maddalena, Sanford Sylvan and Carolann Page) and that company's conductor, John DeMain. It promises to arouse controversy even before the last note has died away.

Adams isn't just any composer who got lucky. He's one of the handful of artists who are doing things their own way on the contemporary American music scene and attracting a wide audience, as well as wide critical dissent for their integrity. Adams could, of course, laugh all the way to the bank. He could capitalize on those four productions of *Nixon*, a phenomenon unprecedented in these times. He could bask in the royalties of his recordings, three of which have been sticking to the bestseller charts for the past few months. He could promote himself to the saturation point.

Or he could just resign himself to the possibility that 1987 will be his year. Adams



RICHARD STUTTING

latest disc, featuring Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony in "The Chairman Dances" (a fantasy on material from *Nixon in China*) and the "Common Tones in Simple Time," has just hit the stores on Nonesuch 79144. It's all quite ravishing—and it should stir up most of the old arguments and prejudices again.

What makes Adams so hot? It's very simple—he writes music people like. Many of those same people also adore his colleagues Philip Glass and Steve Reich, but Adams, who turned forty a few months ago, is the one who seems most likely to transcend the repetitive, minimalist structures that, in the public's ear, bind them all together, and to reembrace the great tradition of what we know as Western classical music.

Major orchestras and important conductors regularly perform his work. Adams

**What's that old president doing in an opera, and in China, no less? And what does composer John Adams think he's doing to contemporary music? Nothing less than tapping our mythic imagination—and he's certain to create controversy.**





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## MUSIC & DANCE

should be ecstatic. But earlier this year, when Leonard Slatkin introduced his assimilable *Harmonielehre* to the New York Philharmonic, half the audience walked out at intermission without hearing a note of the music. Adams was understandably chagrined. And philosophical, too.

"The style of contemporary music," he says, "has been an antagonistic one to listeners for more than eighty years now. Audiences have come to expect the unfamiliar to be unpleasant. For some reason, this does not occur in the world of painting. New York will shortly have four multi-million-dollar museums dedicated to the contemporary visual arts, but it doesn't have one major, full-time organization devoted to contemporary music."

**W**HY DO LISTENERS APPROACH THE music of this century with trepidation and loathing? Adams has spent fifteen years trying to find out. A transplanted New Englander (the name gives him away), he directed the San Francisco Conservatory's New Music Ensemble for much of the 1970s and became de Waart's New Music advisor for the San Francisco Symphony, where they both formulated the orchestra's New and Unusual Music series. The series served as a model for the national Meet the Composer residency program in major orchestras, and Adams became the San Francisco Symphony's first composer in residence from 1982 to 1985.

What he discovered throughout that era depressed him utterly. "The interesting thing about this century," he notes with grim certitude, "is that, with few exceptions, the very best composers have adopted stylistic procedures that have been inaccessible to the average, educated musical concertgoer. I'm not talking about the 'common man.' I mean, I'm a composer with two degrees in composition, and even for me, Milton Babbitt's music is essentially inaccessible. What must it be like for the person sitting next to me, who is not a composer? It must be beyond complex.

"The funny thing is that I'm not making a value judgment. If you ask me to name the best composers of the last fifty years, I would have to mention those whom audiences habitually dislike—Arnold Schoenberg, Elliott Carter, Pierre Boulez. And the century has taught us another strange thing. Unlike the music of Bach or Schubert or Beethoven in earlier eras, these twentieth century works have not become more accessible as the years have gone on."

That's understandable. He adds, "These pieces use a grammar that is not a common grammar. They use a personal grammar of pitch and rhythm, all the things we were taught to do in college to be good composers. And it's those things that have made

the listening experience alien to most audiences. They're not versed in that grammar. A composer like Mozart always worked within a shared language."

A decade ago, Adams returned to tonality. He found a new lyricism in 1977 in the piano work *Phrygian Gates*, and the following year, he brought an engaging sense of historical perspective to the string septet *Shaker Loops*. (Both are seminal Adams and both have been reissued on New Albion

**"We're trying for a Nixon whom nobody saw, except maybe Pat."**

Records NA-007.) He makes no apologies for his style. "Earlier in this century, the composer became a prophet, and, in the case of Schoenberg, a religious figure. Composing for an audience became anathema. I compose for myself. It just so happens that my likes and dislikes happen to be more in synch with those of the average concert audience.

"I don't mean to imply that my music is lowbrow or condescending. I'm just interested in tonality. For some reason, tonality and some manner of periodic rhythm seem to form a kind of grid, an inborn grid, almost something that's part of our gene structure. Once composers abandon those qualities, then music becomes another kind of experience.

"I honestly think that as long as you're using the tempered scale, tonality is the natural organizational mode for the music of the universe. This is a red flag to a lot of people who have bought this bill of goods about the emancipation of the dissonance and the democratization of pitches. We all know that's bullshit.

"For all the really good young composers I know, composers in their twenties, the issue of tonality is simply not an issue. They



## MUSIC & DANCE

just write tonal music. But, when I was in college and, even now, when I deal with older critics, this is like a dreadful thing I'm doing, turning my back on *the tradition*, which usually turns out to be Carter, Roger Sessions or somebody like that."

All that background may explain why the older generation of American composers has written very few lasting operas. Our leading companies, with a few exceptions, are in the habit of commissioning new works from the most promising musicians of 1947. Little wonder the San Francisco Opera's recent decision to order up a grand opera on the Old Testament Book of Esther from seventy-four-year-old Hugo Weisgall aroused little excitement in either the local or national musical communities. (It's set for production in 1991.)

"The prevailing concert music today," Adams says, "is so complex in its rhythmic and structural relationships that it simply does not lend itself to the stage, which, by its very nature, must be freer. Opera takes another kind of composer, one who is more expressive, one whose music is naturally theatrical. Call it a prejudice, if you like, but it's my belief there's a beauty to the human voice that is destroyed by disjunct vocal writing."

**B**UT WHY *NIXON IN CHINA*? SELLARS first invited Adams to collaborate on it several years ago at a New Hampshire music festival. Adams rejected the proposal out of hand, figuring it would be a bore to turn political stereotypes into operatic stereotypes. Then, Adams had a minor revelation. "Opera, I discovered, is a mythic activity. It is successful to the extent that it taps our mythic imagination. Shakespeare and Old Testament stories exist in that imagination, but not with the power that Hitler or Mao Tse-tung or Nixon do. Look at the successful operas of the last few years, Anthony Davis' *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* or Philip Glass' *Satyagraha*, which deals with Gandhi's career. These people are just crackling in our personal and collective mythologies. You say Richard Nixon to someone and watch all the lights start flashing."

The historical reality has helped only up to a point. "In the course of writing this opera, Richard Nixon has become my own Richard Nixon. I'm slightly offended by the Nixon I see on TV, because he's not my Nixon, who's a lot warmer. We're trying for a Nixon whom nobody saw, except maybe Pat."

To that end, Alice Goodman's libretto, written in iambic pentameter, has been preceded by several years of research, which encompassed sources as varied as *Ladies' Home Journal* and Mao Tse-tung's poetry. Each of the three acts will correspond to one of the three days the president spent in

SAN FRANCISCO FOCUS

## MUSIC & DANCE

Beijing. Act one involves the arrival of Air Force One, Nixon shaking hands with forty identical Chinese officials, the meeting with Chairman Mao ("the only time they met, the complex emotional and philosophical core of the opera"), a banquet for nine hundred and a love duet for Pat and Dick, who has had one too many mai-tais and remembers his wife as she was twenty years earlier.

Act two deals with Pat's Chinese tour, where, in a beautiful aria, she ends up extolling a great statue of a stone elephant, "reminding her there are Republicans the world over." Later, Mark Morris will recreate the jingoistic ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. "This," says Adams, "is where all the sex and violence come in the opera, as well as a thunderstorm out of *William Tell*."

Act three "is full of shadows." There's another banquet, which Madame Mao gate-crashes, and, at the end, there will be two duets for the stereophonically placed couples, drifting off into their pasts.

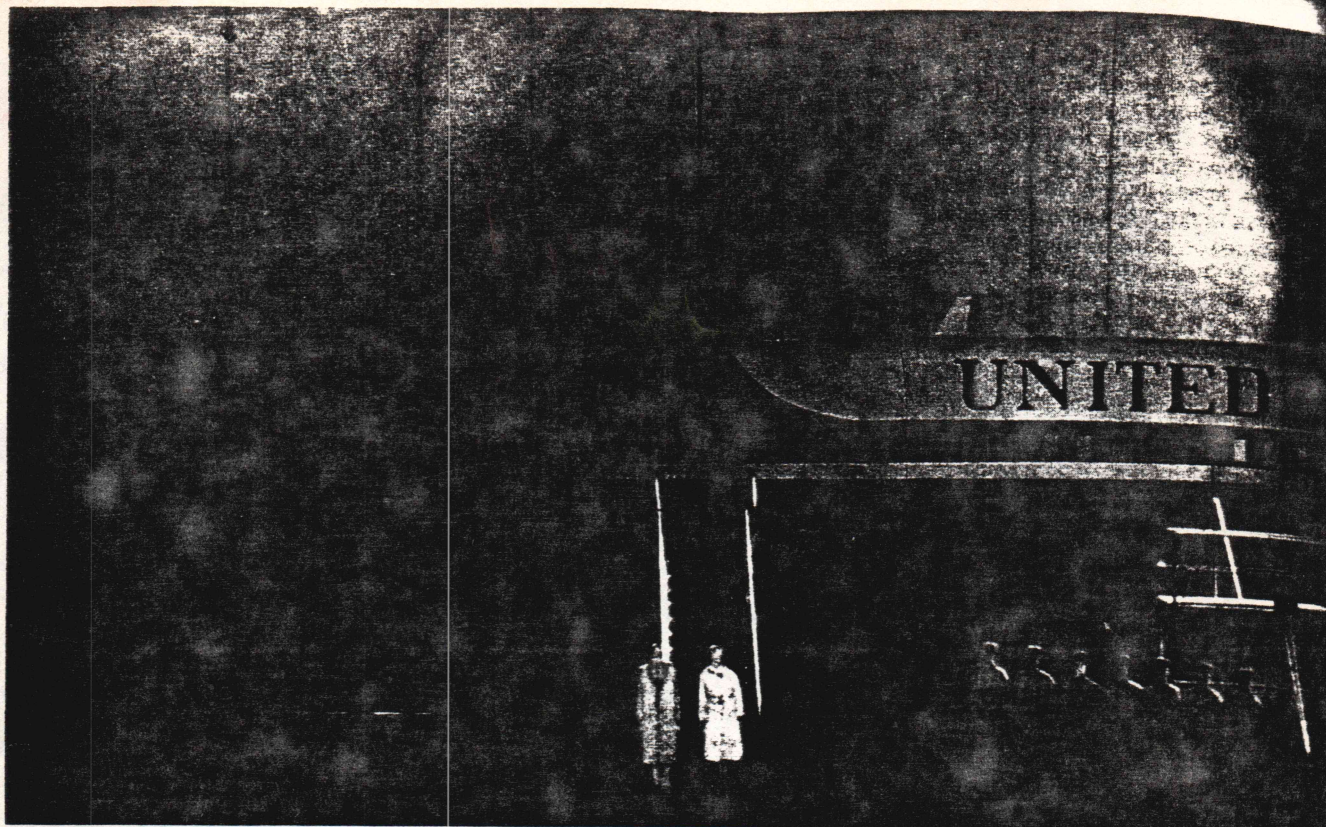
Adams will score *Nixon in China* for modified jazz band, which includes a small, amplified string section and, he says, "this brand new, humongous Yamaha synthesizer, which is about as big as a cockpit." For this month's performances, Adams promises a completely orchestrated first act, with the remainder most likely heard to piano accompaniment.

*Nixon in China* will also conclude the Concert Opera Association's fourth and busiest season, which began with a revival of Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco*, an early and imperfect work by the master, that brought back the great Italian tenor Carlo Bergonzi in a role he first sang thirty-seven years ago. Tenor William Lewis and San Francisco Opera conductor Kathryn Cathcart founded the organization to revive works the venerable company had no intention of staging in the foreseeable future. So far, it has given insatiable opera lovers the opportunity to enjoy Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*, Mozart's *La Finta Giardiniera*, Spontini's *La Vestale* and Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie*. With *Nixon in China*, Concert Opera Association officially welcomes the twentieth century into its repertoire.

Adams, who completed the two-hour-forty-minute score in March, reports little trouble in the writing. "Maybe there were a few problems in composing for tenor and coloratura soprano. They're very special beasts." Indeed, he seems virtually radiant about the chances for success: "It's a genuinely heroic opera, because it deals with events of world-shattering importance. It's also, as Peter likes to say, an opera of national aspiration. And it's a high-energy piece. This is my first, and there will be plenty of kinks to iron out. But, I assure you, nobody will be indifferent."

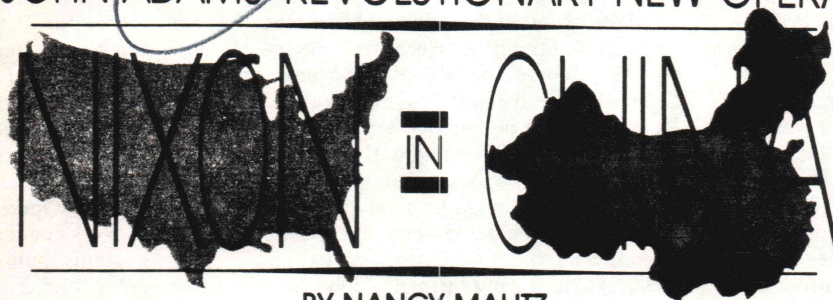
MAY 1987





In Adrienne Lobel's set design for the opening scene, President Nixon arrives on Air Force One at an airfield outside Peking.

## JOHN ADAMS' REVOLUTIONARY NEW OPERA



BY NANCY MALITZ

It's a sizzling July afternoon in a run-down part of Houston. A wirehaired terror called Peter Sellars, arguably the hottest young stage director in the country, is working with Mao Tse-tung's three secretaries. "The Mao-ettes," he calls them. Sellars pauses, looks at the floor in a way that tells you he's visualizing the opera stage. While the thirty-year-old director thinks, Chairman Mao, Chou En-lai, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger cool their heels.

Presently, Sellars has got it. "Let's—let's just try this," he says, moving toward the secretaries in his sneakers and jeans, his arms poised in a balletic gesture. He shows them a hand flick, followed by a quick dunk of the wrist—like

*Nancy Malitz is music critic of the Detroit News.*

the dotting of an "i"—to punctuate their scribbling when they warble, "History is a dirty sow . . ." In Motown style, the secretaries sing the Chairman's philosophical apothegm and mimic Sellars' moves.

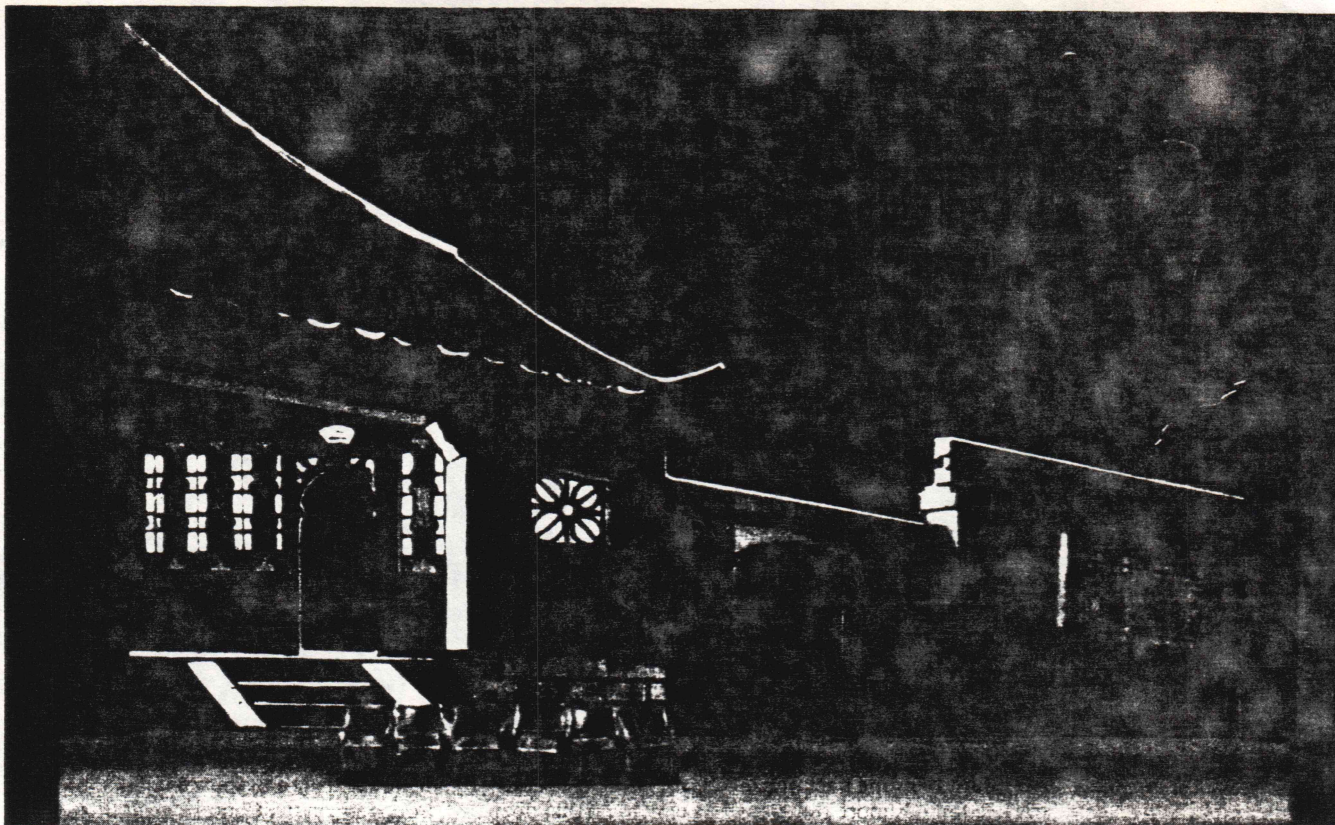
"Every time Mao says one of his golden phrases, they repeat it like that, always in triads," explained the opera's composer, Californian John Adams, over a quick breakfast in New York City earlier this year. A glass of tomato juice en route to his mouth suddenly froze in position, and he turned to his wife, Deborah O'Grady, with a quizzical look. "I wonder where I got that idea. I had groups of triadic women singing in *Grand Pianola Music* and also *Harmonium*." He laughed softly. "I should go into therapy to figure out what it means."



Composer John Adams

Adams' opera, *Nixon in China*, debuts at the Houston Grand Opera on October 22, continuing through November 7, with performances in December at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, in February at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington and in June at the Holland





The evil landlord's mansion figures in the last part of Act Two, the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*.

Festival. Its inspiration was the President's historic three-day visit to Peking in 1972, which opened the doors to diplomatic and commercial relations between the two countries. Its instigator was Sellars. He says he is tired of "being accused of translating old operas. You know, updating a Mozart opera to engage a contemporary audience. Opera *should* be," he emphasizes, "a real attempt—as it was for Mussorgsky and Mozart and Verdi—to meet the world head-on and wrestle with the biggest problems at a given moment. Communist China is a great hot potato, and the world still doesn't know what to do about it."

Sellars is therefore working on a show that's so up-to-date that many of the principal characters are still alive. And this creates another set of problems. As bass Thomas Hammons, who portrays Henry Kissinger, puts it: "This show is so politically oriented, and so daring in some of the things it says outright about characters such as the one I'm portraying, that it might be the most dangerous piece of music written since Beaumarchais and Mozart took on the aristocracy in *The Marriage of Figaro*."

Sellars came up with the *Nixon* idea years ago, while cruising around with some musicians at the Monadnock Music Festival in New Hampshire. "To this day I don't know what put it into my mind. But it was very clear it had to be done. I

liked the sound of the title and I liked the characters. I thought, 'Here are some interesting people: the Nixons, the Maos, Chou En-lai and Henry.' I said, 'Okay, let's meet these people.'"

He approached two fellow Harvard grads: British poet Alice Goodman, whose libretto would ultimately recreate, in elegant iambic pentameter, everything from the arrival of Air Force One to Pat Nixon's tour of a pig farm; and John Adams, the brilliant Minimalist composer with a rich ear for European Romantic harmony and a refreshing, almost innocent love for the American vernacular. Adams insists he was "not in the least responsive to the idea at first," that he could not imagine an opera about these people that wasn't heavy-handed comedy, and that more than anything else, he just couldn't imagine the character Nixon singing. But he liked the idea of a libretto that would be "really fine poetry," and eventually he relented. Then Sellars sent a bunch of Adams' recordings to the honchos at the Houston Grand Opera.

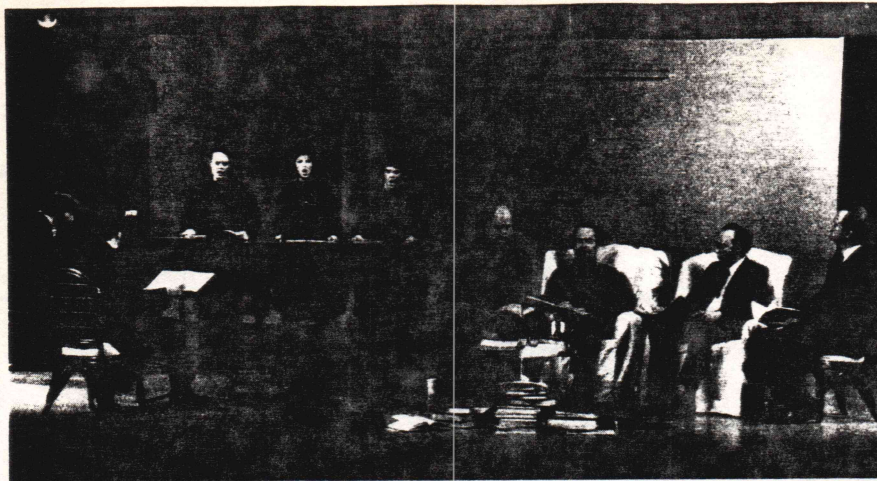
"I listened, and I flipped," says John DeMain, Houston's Music Director, who has previously ushered Carlisle Floyd's *Willie Stark* and Leonard Bernstein's *A Quiet Place* into existence, and presented the American premiere of Philip Glass' *Akhmatov*. "I thought: 'This is so beautiful. It takes Minimalism into a much broader framework. John has allowed the

form to *break out*. His Minimalism becomes much more internal, with a larger arc.' I used to compare Phil Glass and John Adams, and I would say that Phil is Papa Haydn, the founder and the purist, whereas John is Beethoven."

DeMain's enthusiasm was all that Houston Grand Opera General Director David Gockley needed to hear. HGO has acted as Adams' publisher for *Nixon in China* and will hold the rights to publication, recording and television use. The initial Sellars production will be shared by HGO with the other venues mentioned earlier, and other companies are ready to follow suit. Says Gockley proudly: "It's like a nineteenth-century situation where an opera was given its premiere and there was instantly a lineup of companies that wanted the second, third and fourth performances." The up-front cost of Adams' commission is estimated at \$100,000; the production cost is estimated at \$500,000, which will be shared by the various companies.

Getting away from the feeling that the singers—all American—were cast to type is difficult, when you take a look at them. Baritone James Maddalena has a Nixon hairline, the same dark brown hair, and intense eyes. Baritone Sanford Sylvan, the saintly Chinese leader Chou En-lai, has a round, cherubic





The "Mao-ettes," Chou, Mao, Nixon and Kissinger at a Guggenheim Museum run-through.

face and a voice that DeMain describes as "mystical." Bass Thomas Hammons has a Kissinger-like face with craggy features and bushy eyebrows. But what most distinguishes them all is their youth (most are in their early thirties), intelligence, stage flexibility and lyric voices well focused and easy to understand.

Almost all of them were previously known by Sellars or Adams or DeMain. Maddalena and Sylvan came to Houston fresh from the Sellars production of *Così fan tutte* staged at New York's PepsiCo Summerfare. DeMain told soprano Carolann Page more than two years ago that she would be "perfect for Mrs. Nixon, although he said I didn't look like her." (Miss Page sang Cunégonde in the Harold Prince revival of *Candide* on Broadway.) Tenor John Duykers, the Mao, lives in Berkeley and is well known to Adams. Most of them have known for a year that they would be cast, and they've become walking encyclopedias of their characters. They have also spent plenty of time with the music—performing a run-through of two scenes at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City last fall and a concert version of the complete opera in San Francisco in May.

"Those were valuable experiences for us all," declares DeMain. "You know, in this score you hear these pop styles you're familiar with, and you hear these constantly repeated Minimalist patterns, and you think it's simple music. But in fact it's very difficult. The eighth-notes are going on constantly underneath, and the meter is changing at just about every bar. I feel as if I'm conducting *The Rite of Spring* for three hours."

The composer of this intricate music points out that, at forty, he's "ancient for a ballplayer—but, for a composer, still a child." With glasses, thinning gray hair and a high, melodious voice, John Adams seems gentle and unprepossessing, the kind of man you'd mistake instantly for a librarian or a conservatory professor. He readily confesses that he is sick of working on the opera, which has snowed him

under for more than two years. And he happily describes his Nixon style as "intensely American, no *chinoiserie*. If there's a model for its simplicity, I would have to say it's Mozart.

"On one level, Mozart's actions seem so simple and almost childlike that our three-year-old can watch *The Magic Flute* and enjoy it. Yet you can keep peeling back the layers and find more and more there—if you care to go that deep. That's my model for the new opera's musical language, too. On the one hand, you can say, 'Gee, haven't I heard this music before?' It has this vernacular quality. But I believe that you can continue to peel the layers back and find beneath the surface a lot of very complex relationships. Complexity can take different courses. A complex emotion, or atmosphere, or ambiguity in tone is to me far more interesting than the abstruse rhythmic and tonal experimentation that's been going on ever since I was a kid."



Carolann Page (l.) inspects her Pat Nixon costume.

When Dick and Pat lose themselves in a romantic reverie, they do it to the accompaniment of a ripe saxophone quartet *à la* Glenn Miller, which Adams points out is the music they must have danced to when they were first in love. "There's a spot where John wrote in three muted trumpets for them," DeMain relates. "I mean, it's real sweet, it's Sammy Kaye. It'll be a lot of fun."

And Mao, the great mythic figure, gets the funky Motown harmony. As Adams explains it: "My take on Mao is that he's a genius, politically and philosophically—Alice thinks he's a great poet, too, and she should know. But there's also a side of him back on the farm and very much rooted in the people, so I reflect that sometimes, in music that gets really gritty." The dangerous and vindictive Madame Mao, a shrieking coloratura played by soprano Trudy Ellen Craney, connects to the Queen of the Night and other devilish roles.

Adams says that the creative team has taken great pains to avoid kitsch and "Saturday Night Live" satire. "There are moments," he affirms, "when the opera is very funny—as in the meeting with Mao. Nixon is trying to show Mao that he has boned up on his Chinese history, and Mao will say something that's just completely obscure, some conundrum or riddle, and Nixon will lean forward like an eager schoolboy and say, 'Oh, now you're talking about Wang Ming and Li Li-san, I recognize that,' and Mao will devastate him with, 'I spoke generally.' You see the beads of sweat on Nixon's forehead as he tries to show the Chairman that he's not the rube Mao might think he is.

"But we're not having fun at Nixon's expense. I think the portrait of Nixon is very touching and, ultimately, very human. He took an incredible chance going there. He didn't even know for sure he was going to get to see Mao—who was very old at the time."

If the Nixon creative team, who are all to some extent children of the 1960s, have taken another look at their ex-President and found him in possession of some admirable, appealing qualities, they have also taken another look at Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and found him wanting. In the opera, his role is trivial at best. "At first, we weren't going to have him speak at all," says Sellars, chuckling a little. "We had read his memoirs [the lengthy *The White House Years*] and we did not want to hear another word from him. So we possibly revenged ourselves."

Among Kissinger's lines: "Who, me?" "I'm lost," "Please, where's the toilet?" and, most telling, "I'm here to liaise/ With the backroom boys/Who know how to live./And me, I contrive/To catch a few





Above: Controversial stage director Peter Sellars (l.) confers with conductor John DeMain. Below: Sellars coaches two Mao-ettes, Marion Dry (c.) and Mari Opatz (r.).



crumbs—/The ringleaders' names./The gist of their schemes—/Loose change."

Sellars quickly hedges. "We were really concentrating on Nixon and the others, so we just didn't pick incidents where Kissinger was especially prominent. The one thing we did is have him appear in Madame Mao's ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*, as the evil landlord who beats up a woman. But he's not exactly Kissinger there. His part is doubled, the way Masetto and the Commendatore are sung by the same person in *Don Giovanni*. Sure, there's some kind of character implication—but it's also really very much an opera formality that the bass is the heavy. Also, there is a traditional *basso buffo* role in the history of opera."

The opera opens in an airfield outside Peking, with a scene that all will remember who saw the TV coverage of Nixon's arrival on Air Force One. "There's a touching moment when he gets off the airplane," states Sylvan, the Chou En-lai. "Chou literally introduces him to forty identical-looking men. And what is so beautiful is that Nixon tries to take time with every one of them. He doesn't speak the language, and the names all sound the same, and the faces all look the same, yet he tries to take a moment with each of them." Nixon launches into an amazing aria, which Adams describes as "very fast and very bravura—thinking about his place in history and the fact that the image of him shaking hands with these men is being telecast all over the world and that he's making history like the astronauts. It's wonderful and amusing and wry, and at the same time very human."

The next scene is the chaotic meeting of Chou, Mao, Nixon and Kissinger, along with the Mao-ette secretaries. All

talk at once, and the Westerners have trouble holding their own against the inscrutable dialogue of their counterparts. Nixon tries to score points, Kissinger is lost, Chou is ever diplomatic and Mao, the indefatigable revolutionary, triumphs with the last, pointed words: "Founders come first, then profiteers."

Finally, Act One closes with a banquet in the Great Hall of the People, in which Chou makes a profound and deeply felt toast and Nixon follows. "Nixon may sound a little corny," admits James Madalena, who plays the part. "But we're talking about a man from an American culture that is two hundred years old sitting next to Mao and Chou, whose culture goes back thousands of years. Europeans have this idea about us that we are like children in our attitudes. But I think it's nice to be a little naive and just a little idealistic. We have this beautiful naiveté that is really American, and I think this comes out in Nixon."

In Act Two, Pat Nixon "does" China. "It's her '*Porgi amor*' scene," says Adams. "She visits a commune, a pig farm, an acupuncture clinic, the Forbidden City, and then she launches into her own aria, which is her vision of America. And then, in the last part of the act, we have the ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*—which is where we get all our sex and violence in." The opera's choreographer is the much-acclaimed Mark Morris, a contemporary of Sellars who has created works for the Joffrey Ballet and Seattle Opera as well as for his own modern-dance troupe.

The finale, Act Three, is another grand banquet in the Great Hall, in which the characters react emotionally to the importance of the occasion and wrap themselves in memories. The almost saintly Chou En-lai, who ate rice and slept on a slab until his final days, closes with a probing aria questioning how much of what he and Mao did was right, and observing that everything seems to move beyond remedy in their mission to feed a billion people.

"The subject matter is revolution," attests Sellars of Adams' *Nixon in China*. "There's no way around that. But back then, the Communist ideology was in a pitched battle with capitalism, and today we find both ideologies reforming themselves. Gorbachev is in the middle of *glasnost*, and meanwhile American companies are having to try new management strategies in order to survive in an era of layoffs and falling prices and massive bankruptcies. So those issues which in the sixties looked like they were so pitched in permanent battle aren't so, any longer. If someone as major as Gorbachev decides it's time to introduce some capitalism in his country, you know, then it's time to bring up these issues again. I can't say we're presenting any kind of solution, because that's not our job. But we want to remind people that these issues really do exist."

"I think this show is as much to the point as *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Carlo* were in their own time period, and I'm glad about that," Sellars observes. "Most of the time, people don't think about the subject matter of opera at all. I mean, it's the most amusing anomaly to see these (mostly) extremely wealthy people who live very nice lives going to see stories of rape, murder, incest and other grotesque, hideous things that have been so completely sanitized by the sort of plush decor they're now placed in, that they don't even feel it!"

"It's nice that people can feel that extra *frisson* again and realize that opera really does engage with the world. There's going to be a real surge of writing like this in the 1990s. I think we're finally going to be able to touch that again."



# NEWS RELEASE

## Nixon in China - Fact Sheet

**Nixon in China**, Opera in two acts

Music by John Adams, Libretto by Alice Goodman

Commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

**World Premiere:** Houston Grand Opera, Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center,  
Thursday, October 22, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

**Additional performances:**

Sunday, October 25, 1987, 2:00 p.m.

Wednesday, October 28, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, October 31, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, November 3, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, November 5, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, November 7, 1987, 7:30 p.m.

**Production Staff**

Conductor: John DeMain

Stage Director: Peter Sellars\*\*

Choreographer: Mark Morris\*\*

Set Designer: Adrienne Lobel\*\*

Costume designer: Dunya Ramicova\*\*

Lighting Designer: Jim Ingalls\*\*

**Artists**

Richard Nixon.....James Maddalena\*\*, American baritone

Pat Nixon.....Carolann Page\*\*, American soprano

Chou En-lai.....Sanford Sylvan\*\*, American baritone

Mao Tse-tung.....John Duykers\*\*, American tenor

Chiang Ching (Madame Mao)..Trudy Ellen Craney\*\*, American soprano

Henry Kissinger.....Thomas Hammons\*\*, American bass

1st Secretary to Mao (Nancy Tang).....Mari Opatz\*\*, American mezzo-soprano

2nd Secretary to Mao.....Stephanie Friedman\*\*, American mezzo-soprano

3rd Secretary to Mao.....Marion Dry\*\*, American contralto

**Act I**

Scene 1: The airport outside Peking (Nixon's arrival)

Scene 2: The Imperial City (Meeting with Mao)

Scene 3: The Great Hall of the People (The first banquet)

**Act II**

Scene 1: Mrs. Nixon views China

Scene 2: The Peking Opera ('The Red Detachment of Women')

Scene 3: The last night in Peking

\*\*Houston Grand Opera Debut.

Houston Grand  
**Opera**



**Significant Facts:**

-The libretto is written in octosyllabic couplets, except for the choral parts of Act II, scene 2, which are written in skeltonics.

-Nixon in China is composer John Adams' first opera.

-The Chairman Dances, based on a scene from an early synopsis of the opera, has been released on the Nonesuch label with Edo De Waart conducting.

-Workshop performances of Nixon in China have been held at New York's Guggenheim Museum on Sunday, November 2 and Monday, November 3, 1986 (first act only), as part of their "Works and Process" series and at the Herbst Theater, San Francisco, on May 21 and 22 (complete work), presented by American Inroads. The work (no orchestration) was presented with piano at the Guggenheim and two pianos and synthesizer in San Francisco.

-Nixon in China is a co-production of the Houston Grand Opera, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Los Angeles Music Center Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Netherlands Opera.

-Celebrating Houston Grand Opera's move to the new Gus S. Wortham Theater Center, Nixon in China will be performed in a Fall Repertory period from October 15 to November 10, 1987, in company with Verdi's Aida, starring Placido Domingo and Mirella Freni, and Mozart's The Abduction from the Seraglio.

-The work is orchestrated for 33 musicians: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 3 clarinets, 1 soprano, 1 alto, 1 tenor, 1 baritone saxophone, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 percussion (no tympani), 3 keyboards, 4 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos, 2 basses.

-There will be 16 choristers: 4 sopranos, 4 altos, 4 tenors and 4 basses. Ten dancers and 28 supers (20 adult, 8 children) complete the ensemble.

-Houston performances are being generously underwritten by The Brown Foundation Inc., of Houston, Texas.

6/8/87. Rev. 9/28/87



# NEWS RELEASE

**TRUDY ELLEN CRANEY**, Soprano, Chiang Ching (Madame Mao)

Trudy Ellen Craney has been acclaimed for her performances in the most diverse of operatic repertoire. She has performed in Rudenstein's Faustus and in Cherubini's Medea to equally enthusiastic reception by press and public. Following her impressive performances as Berta in Connecticut Grand Opera's The Barber of Seville, in which traditionally cut sections of the Rossini score were restored by the conductor in order that she have more opportunity to be heard, Miss Craney stepped, at the last minute, into the title role of the company's Lucia di Lammermoor, resulting in a dramatic and vocal triumph.

Miss Craney's successes include major roles in Bach's Amadis des Gaules, Wright's The Wings of Expectation, Henze's Pollecino, Rogers' The Veil, I due Foscari and I Masnadieri, as well as the more widely known La Traviata, Così fan tutte, Rigoletto and Carmen. She has been a guest on Robert Sherman's Listening Room (WQXR) of the New York Times, RAI-TV, RAI-Radio of the French network; at The Doelen in Rotterdam, Holland, Carnegie Recital Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, the Mai Musical Bordeaux in France and the Festival di Norma (Italy) where she was guest artist with the Guglielmi String Quartet. In the United States, her appearances include performances with the Connecticut Grand Opera, Center for Contemporary Opera, Monmouth Arts Center, Syracuse Opera, Canterbury Concert Series and the Monmouth Symphony. For the 1988 season, she will sing Nedda in Connecticut Grand Opera's I Pagliacci and will debut with the Chattanooga Opera, singing Edina in The Elixir of Love.

Miss Craney is making her Houston Grand Opera debut as Chiang Ching (Madame Mao) in the world premiere of John Adams' and Alice Goodman's Nixon in China in Houston.

Manager: James Harwood  
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4/7/87, rev. 6/10/87 and 7/29/87

Houston Grand  
**Opera**



**Marion Dry, contralto, Third Secretary to Mao**

Marion Dry has established her name as a leading artist in that rarely heard vocal category—the true contralto. The rich quality of her voice, combined with her fine musicianship and intelligence have elicited high praise from audiences and critics alike. The Cleveland Press has hailed her "voice of brilliant texture" and the Boston Globe has lauded her "dark, lustrous tones." A sought-after artist, Ms. Dry performs music from the Baroque through contemporary and has proven herself equally at home on the operatic, concert and recital stages. Most recently she made a notable impression on the New York press for her appearances as Erda in the Boston Lyric Opera production of the Wagner "Ring" Cycle.

Ms. Dry has appeared in concert with the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall and at the Blossom Music Festival, the Hartford Symphony, Chicago's Music of the Baroque, the Worcester Symphony, the Masterworks Chorale and the John Oliver Chorale, among others. These engagements included performances of Handel's Messiah, Beethoven's Mass in B Minor and Christmas Oratorio. She has sung leading operatic roles with the New England Wagner Festival, Boston Concert Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Artists Internationale, Opera New England and at the Blossom Music Center. Among her roles are Marcellina in Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro; Erda, Schwertleite and First Norn in Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen; Orfeo in Gluck's Orfeo ed Euridice, Dido in Purcell's Dido and Aeneas; Mistress Quickly in Verdi's Falstaff; Lucretia in Britten's The Rape of Lucretia; and the Mother in Menotti's The Consul. She also runs the gamut of many Gilbert and Sullivan roles, such as Katisha in The Mikado, Queen of the Fairies in Iolanthe and Ruth in The Pirates of Penzance. Her recital programming is always innovative. Of special interest is "The English Contralto", a recital which explores the repertoire written for Dame Clara Butt and Kathleen Ferrier.

Marion Dry was chosen by composer Ivan Tcherepnin to sing the world premiere of his "Five Songs for Contralto, Flute and Electronics" for a series originated by WFMT in Chicago, "The Contemporary Art Song". A subsequent CRI label recording has been called "one of the best records of the year" by Richard Dyer of the Boston Globe. Ms. Dry has also performed Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire.

A Bachelor of Arts recipient in English Literature at Harvard University, Ms. Dry earned her Master of Music degree in Voice at Northwestern University, winning several awards for singing and opera. She also has studied at the Tanglewood Festival, the Blossom Festival School, the Minnesota Opera Company, and with Boris Goldovsky.

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5/8/87, rev. 7/29/87



Revised 7/29/87

**JOHN DUYKERS, tenor, Mao Tse-tung**

John Duykers made his professional operatic debut with the Seattle Opera in 1966. Since that time he has appeared with many of the leading opera companies around the world including San Francisco Opera, Santa Fe Opera, the Grand Theatre of Geneva, the Stadttheater in Dusseldorf, the Stadtische Buhnen of Frankfurt, Tulsa Opera, Portland Opera, Seattle Opera, Arizona Opera, Mobile Opera, Vancouver Opera, Sacramento Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera Studio. His repertoire encompasses more than forty roles including Cavaradossi in Tosca, Canio in I Pagliacci, Don Jose in Carmen and Alvaro in La Forza del Destino.

During the past twelve years, Duykers has performed regularly with San Francisco Opera and its affiliates: Western Opera Theatre, Spring Opera Theatre, Brown Bag Opera, etc. in roles such as the Duke of Cornwall in the American premiere of Reimann's Lear in 1981 (repeated in 1985), Rumpelstiltskin in Conrad Sousa's Transformations, Lucano in L'Incoronazione di Poppea, Satyavan in Holst's Savitri, Corn Man in Janice Gitek's A'Agita, and in Gianni Schicchi, Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg, Die Frau ohne Schatten and Salome.

In 1981 Duykers appeared for the first time with Las Vegas Opera as Cavaradossi in Tosca. In 1982 he returned to Las Vegas for his first Pinkerton in Madama Butterfly. That same year he made his debut with Seattle Opera as Don Jose in Carmen. The 1983-84 season brought his debut with Sacramento Opera in Tosca and a return to Seattle Opera as Alvaro in La Forza del Destino. In 1984-85 he made his debut with Arizona Opera in Boris Godunov and appeared in Tulsa Opera's 'Look-in' performances of Carmen. He sang the role of Malatestino in Francesca da Rimini with the Concert Opera of San Francisco opposite Renata Scotto and closed that season with the revival of Reimann's Lear with San Francisco Opera. In 1985-86 he was seen in SeeHear of George Coates Performance Works at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia and in the world premiere of another Coates work, RareArea in Brussels. RareArea was later presented with Duykers at U.C. Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall and for extended runs in San Francisco (Herbst Theater) and Los Angeles (UCLA and the Doolittle Theater). In November 1985 he returned to Tulsa Opera for 'Look-ins' of Aida. The following spring brought a highly successful debut with Mobile Opera as Canio in I Pagliacci and a return engagement with San Francisco's Concert Opera in Spontini's La Vestale with Carol Neblett.

Duykers appears frequently in recital and with symphony orchestras. He has performed with the Sacramento Symphony, Pacific Symphony, Modesto Symphony, Oakland Symphony, Mid-Columbia Symphony, the Orange County Master Chorale and the Los Angeles Master Chorale at the Music Center. His appearances at major music festivals have included the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia, the Sitka Festival, the Inverness Festival, the Gaudemus Music Week in the Netherlands, the Kaitheater Festival in Brussels, the Brooklyn



Academy of Music's 'Next Wave' Festival, the London International Festival of Theatre, the Internationale Teaterfestival in Copenhagen and the Festival Internacional de Teatro of Granada.

A noted interpreter of contemporary music, John Duykers has received critical acclaim for such roles as George III in Peter Maxwell Davies' Eight Songs for a Mad King, Esteban Montejó in the first English language performances of Henze's El Cimarrón, in creating the role of Juan Diego in La Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe of Garza for the Theater for the Performing Arts in Tucson and in the role of Duykers in George Coates' Duykers the First, which had an extended run in San Francisco and later toured the major European festivals, receiving critical acclaim at the festivals of Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Lille and Brussels.

In 1984 Duykers was appointed to the music screening panel for opera and music theater of the National Endowment for the Arts.

During the 1986-87 season John Duykers appeared with San Francisco Opera in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, on the 'Works and Process' Series at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, with San Francisco's Concert Opera and made his debut as Shuisky with the Opera Company of Philadelphia's highly acclaimed production of Boris Godunov. He has been engaged to create the role of Mao Tse-tung in the premiere of John Adams' opera Nixon in China, a co-commission of Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

California Artists Management  
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3/87



**STEPHANIE FRIEDMAN**, mezzo-soprano, 2nd Secretary to Mao

A singer of widely diversified talents, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Friedman performs regularly in music ranging from Baroque to contemporary in recital, concert and opera.

Miss Friedman made her professional opera debut singing the role of Amore in Monteverdi's L'Incoronazione di Poppea under Alan Curtis. A noted interpreter of early opera, she has appeared as La Haine in Gluck's Armide in Bologna and Innsbruck; as Evanco in Handel's Rodrigo in Innsbruck; in Cesti's Il Tito in Innsbruck, Ancona, Venice and Turin. She has become known as a Handel specialist having sung the title roles of Xerxes, Ariodante and Julius Caesar and the leading mezzo roles of Teseo and Rinaldo with San Francisco's Pocket Opera, where she has also been heard as Dido in Purcell's Dido and Aeneas. Not limited to this repertoire, she has appeared as Angelina in La Cenerentola, Elisabetta in Maria Stuarda and Jane Seymour in Anna Bolena with Pocket Opera; Dorabella in Mozart's Così fan tutte at the San Luis Obispo Mozart Festival; Romeo in Bellini's I Capuletti ed I Montecchi, produced by the University of California, Davis, and Suzuki in Puccini's Madama Butterfly with the Marin Opera. With San Francisco Opera's Spring Opera Theatre she was in Britten's Death in Venice and Kurka's Good Soldier Schweik.

Stephanie Friedman has appeared as soloist with most of the major California orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony, Sacramento Symphony, Oakland Symphony and the Stockton Symphony. In the 1982-83 season, she was featured soloist with the San Jose Symphony in Mahler's Ruckert Songs, returning in 1986 for Mozart's Mass in C Minor. In January 1983, she was featured by the San Francisco Symphony in its Festival honoring composer Vivian Fine. She has performed in the San Francisco Symphony's annual Beethoven Festival under Michael Tilson Thomas and at the Cabrillo Festival in Frank Martin's opera Le Vin Herbe.

Miss Friedman has an affinity for contemporary music which has been recognized by a number of distinguished composers. Vivian Fine's recent Canticles for Jerusalem were composed for and dedicated to Stephanie Friedman. She was the soloist for the premiere of Roger Sessions' When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd; for Andrew Imbrie's Roethke Songs and for the West Coast premiere of Cambodian composer Chinary Ung's Mohori. She has performed works of Boulez, George Crumb, David del Tredici and Edward Lawton, as well as the 20th Century masters, Bartok, Hindemith, Britten and Stravinsky.

In December 1985, the San Francisco Examiner termed her one of the "Art Treasures from 1985". In the 1987-88 season, Stephanie Friedman will appear again with the San Jose Symphony in Berlioz's Romeo et Juliette.

California Artists Mgt, 1182 Market, ste. 418, San Francisco, CA.  
rev. 7/29/87



**THOMAS HAMMONS, bass-baritone, Henry Kissinger**

Bass-baritone Thomas Hammons holds a Master of Music degree from the Cincinnati Conservatory, where he studied with Italo Tajo under a Corbett scholarship. Widely applauded for his mastery of the buffo repertory, Mr. Hammons has performed over 40 roles from coast to coast, with the San Francisco, Santa Fe, Cleveland, Dayton, Boston, Fort Worth Opera companies and Michigan Opera Theatre among many others. His principal roles include Dr. Bartolo, Leperello, Don Pasquale, Don Magnifico, Dulcamara and Sacristan, and he has also appeared in many contemporary operas.

Most recently he sang Capulet in Romeo and Juliet in Augusta, Bartolo in The Marriage of Figaro in Fort Worth, Dulcamara in The Elixir of Love in Grand Rapids and Don Pasquale with Opera New England.

Mr. Hammons has also been a soloist with numerous orchestras including those of Cincinnati, Dayton, Charlotte, Charleston and Duluth.

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5/11/87 . rev. 7/29/87

Revised 7/29/87

**JAMES MADDALENA, baritone, Richard Nixon**

James Maddalena made an auspicious debut at the age of nineteen with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops; while still a student at the New England Conservatory of Music, he was invited to perform a Rodgers and Hammerstein medley at the orchestra's 1974 season premiere.

For three seasons (1975-77), Mr. Maddalena took part in the Wolf Trap Opera Program, at which he performed Aaron Copland's arrangements of Early American Songs with the National Symphony under the direction of the composer. At Wolf Trap he also performed Stravinsky's Pribaoutki with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, under the direction of Dennis Russell Davies, and Mahler's Ruckert Lieder with the Elliot Feld Ballet. Since then he has appeared numerous times as guest artist with the Ballet.

Since 1973, Mr. Maddalena, an expert in Bach performance, has appeared as soloist in all of Bach's cantatas with Emmanuel Music, the choir and orchestra at Boston's Emmanuel Church that is conducted by Craig Smith and dedicated to weekly performances of the cantatas. Mr. Maddalena's oratorio performances have won him great acclaim from critics in Boston as well as New York, where he was baritone soloist at Carnegie Hall in Banchetto Musicale's 1984 Messiah on original instruments.

Mr. Maddalena has won high praise for his interpretations of German Lieder, in particular the song cycles of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf. In 1983 Boston Phoenix music critic Lloyd Schwartz named James Maddalena performer of the year, in part because of his performance in the controversial production of Schubert's Winterreise, staged by Joann Green at the Boston Shakespeare Company.

James Maddalena is a founding member of the Liederkreis Ensemble, which won the 1980 Naumburg Award for chamber music. With the Liederkreis he recorded both sets of Brahms' Liebeslieder Waltzes. He has also made three recordings with Banchetto Musicale: Telemann's St. Luke Passion, performing the role of Jesus (Titanic TI-88 & 89); Handel's L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato (Arabesque ABQ 6554-2); and Haydn's Lord Nelson Mass (Arabesque, to be released in 1987). Since 1982 Mr. Maddalena has been voice instructor at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.

Since 1981, Mr. Maddalena has performed regularly in the operatic productions of the brilliant young stage director Peter Sellars. Sellars cast Maddalena in the title role of Mozart's Don Giovanni, as well as in key roles in Handel's Orlando (American Repertory Theatre, 1982), Mozart's Così fan tutte (Castle Hill Festival, 1984); PepsiCo Summerfare, 1986 and 1987), Haydn's Armida (New Hampshire Symphony, 1983), and Handel's Giulio Cesare in Egitto and



the Brecht/Weill Kleine Mahagonny, (both at PepsiCo Summerfare, 1985). Giulio Cesare was revived by the Opera Company of Boston in 1987; the production and Mr. Maddalena's performance received praise from the press. He also performed in Così fan tutte at the Theater der Welt Festival in Stuttgart, West Germany in June 1987.

In October 1987, Maddalena will perform the role of Nixon in Houston Grand Opera's world premiere of John Adams' Nixon in China, a collaboration of librettist Alice Goodman, stage director Peter Sellars and choreographer Mark Morris. The production is a co-commission of Houston Grand Opera, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

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**MARI OPATZ**, mezzo-soprano, Nancy Tang, 1st Secretary to Mao

Mari Opatz has experienced in her young career a series of outstanding achievements and is quickly establishing herself as one of America's most exciting young performers. Ms. Opatz has performed with such companies as New York City Opera National Company, Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Dallas, Mobile Opera, The Pennsylvania Opera Theatre, Chataqua Opera, Chattanooga Opera, Des Moines Opera and Opera Delaware.

In 1987, Ms. Opatz became a recipient of a William Matheus Sullivan Foundation Award.

Ms. Opatz made her European debut in 1985 as Hansel in Hansel and Gretel on an extensive tour with the Philharmonie Pomorska from Poland.

Mari is equally at home in concert and has sung with the Chattanooga Symphony, Chautauqua Symphony, Pittsburgh Civic Orchestra, West Virginia Symphonette, Charleston Baptist College Symphony Orchestra, and Buffalo Symphony Orchestra.

Upcoming engagements include Komponist with Atlanta Opera in their production of Ariadne Auf Naxos, The Kitchen Boy in Rusalka with Minnesota Opera and with Chattanooga Symphony and Opera Association, Mari will perform Cherubino in The Marriage of Figaro and will be the Mezzo-soprano Soloist in Beethoven's Symphony 9.

rev. 7/29/87; 9/3/87



**CAROLANN PAGE, soprano, Pat Nixon**

Carolann Page is a frequent guest artist with leading opera companies throughout America. During the past two seasons, she has performed principal operatic roles with the opera companies of Cincinnati, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Stamford, Anchorage and Toledo. Her repertoire with these companies includes the roles of Adina in L'Elisir d'Amore, Norina in Don Pasquale, Mimi and Musetta in La Boheme, Nanetta in Falstaff, Susanna in The Marriage of Figaro, and Pamina in The Magic Flute.

A superb actress as well as a singer, Carolann Page has appeared in two Broadway productions: as Cunegonde in the now legendary revival of Candide directed by Harold Prince; and in George Abbott's Music Is. She has also performed Rosabella in the Kansas City Opera's Most Happy Fella, Julie in Carousel with the Cincinnati Opera and Rose in Street Scene with the Chautauqua Opera.

Ms. Page's recent orchestra engagements have included appearances with the orchestra's of Cleveland, New Orleans, Oklahoma, Denver, Florida, Cedar Rapids, Trenton, the Chautauqua, Springfield, Flint and Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia in repertoire that has included the Faure Requiem, Poulenc's Stabat Mater, Barber's Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Berlioz' Les Nuits d'Ete, Mozart's Exultate jubilate, Bach's Cantata No. 51, Mahler's Symphony No. 2 and 4, Haydn's Creation, Beethoven's 9th Symphony, Mozart's C Minor Mass and Villa-Lobos' Bachianas Brasilieras, as well as popular programs of operetta and Broadway selections. She also has performed her own "An Evening of Sondheim" with the Boston Pops Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony Pops and with the Chautauqua Orchestra.

Carolann Page has performed as a featured soloist in recitals and chamber music concerts in Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Pittsburgh and New Jersey, and at festivals of Chautauqua, Ambler, Blossom and the Berkshire Chorale Institute.

Born in Odessa, Texas, Carolann Page was raised in Philadelphia and received her Bachelor's of Music degree from the Curtis Institute of Music. At the personal invitation of Rudolf Serkin, she made her professional debut at the Marlboro Music Festival singing the Beethoven Choral Fantasy under the baton of Pablo Casals.

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**SANFORD SYLVAN, baritone, Chou En-lai**

Sanford Sylvan first received national recognition in September 1979, when he won third prize in the Kennedy Center-Rockefeller Foundation International Vocal Competition. Since that time he has distinguished himself in repertoire that ranges from Bach cantata and Handel opera to world premieres of contemporary works. In addition, Mr. Sylvan's reputation as first-class recitalist is undisputed.

A graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, Mr. Sylvan made his debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1977 under the direction of Pierre Boulez, singing the world premiere of Daniel Plante's Love in the Asylum. The following year, Mr. Sylvan travelled to Paris to sing the music of Theodore Antoniou on French Radio.

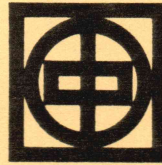
Currently a resident of Boston, Sanford Sylvan is one of that city's most active vocal soloists. He appears annually with the Handel and Haydn Society in Symphony Hall and also performs with the Cantata Singers, Alea III, Banchetto Musicale, the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, and many other Boston-based ensembles. Under the direction of Blanche Moyse, he performs for the New England Bach Festival and is a participant at the Marlboro Music Festival. He appeared as featured vocalist on the 1984 and 1985 "Music from Marlboro" tours in repertoire including Barber's Dover Beach, Beethoven's Scottish Songs and Ravel's Chansons Madecasses.

Mr. Sylvan is well-known for his performances in the productions of the stage director Peter Sellars. In 1982, he performed the title role in the Sellars production of Handel's opera Orlando in more than 15 performances at the American Repertory Theatre. He also appeared as a singer/actor in the American premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies' opera The Lighthouse, under the direction of Sellars at the Boston Shakespeare Company. At PepsiCo Summerfare 1985 Mr. Sylvan was featured in a concert of Bach cantatas conducted by Craig Smith as well as in the Sellars production of Weill's Little Mahagonny and Bach's Cantata 60. AT the 1986 PepsiCo festival he appeared as Alfonso in Sellars' production of Così fan tutte.

The 1985-86 season held important debuts for Sanford Sylvan: with the San Francisco Symphony, performing Stravinsky's Abraham and Isaac and the Boston Symphony Orchestra Chamber Players in a performance of Mahler's Songs of a Wayfarer, arranged by Schoenberg. He was featured in the world premiere of the Philip Glass opera, The Juniper Tree, directed by Andre Serban at the American Repertory Theatre. Since 1978, Sylvan has been working in collaboration with pianist David Breitman. They have given numerous recitals throughout the United States, performing repertoire that ranges from baroque to contemporary.

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**JOHN ADAMS DISCUSSES  
"NIXON IN CHINA"  
FRIDAY, MAY 29, 1987  
7:30 P.M.**

BERKELEY COMPOSER JOHN ADAMS WILL DISCUSS AND ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS NEW OPERA "NIXON IN CHINA" AT AN INFORMAL LECTURE PRESENTATION WITH RECORDED EXAMPLES, TO BE GIVEN AT THE CHINESE CULTURE CENTER AUDITORIUM AT 7:30 P.M. ON FRIDAY, MAY 29.

ADAMS BASED HIS OPERA ON THE HISTORICAL MEETINGS IN BEIJING BETWEEN PRESIDENT NIXON AND CHAIRMAN MAO IN 1972, OPENING THE WAY FOR TIES BETWEEN THE U.S. AND CHINA, AFTER AN INTERRUPTION OF MORE THAN THREE DECADES. IN ADDITION TO MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS, MATTERS OF STYLE, AND STRUCTURAL PROPORTIONS, HE WILL ALSO TALK ABOUT SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF TURNING CURRENT EVENTS INTO MUSICAL THEATER. THE TALK WILL BE FOLLOWED BY QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE.

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## STATE-OF-THE-ART ELECTRONIC KEYBOARD FEATURED IN "NIXON IN CHINA" PRODUCTION

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**YAMAHA MUSIC CORPORATION, USA**

Page 2

musicians think about electronic keyboards," said Ron Raup, Division Manager for the Electronic Keyboard Division of Yamaha Music Corporation, USA, developers of the instrument.

"The HX System is simply the most powerful -- most versatile -- electronic keyboard system in the world, " said Raup.

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# JOHN ADAMS ★ NIXON IN CHINA

Nixon in China, John Adams' first opera, was composed in 1986-87 on a co-commission from the Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the Kennedy Center, and received its premiere on October 23, 1987 in Houston. Based on Richard Nixon's seven-day visit to Beijing in February, 1972, the work features a libretto by poet Alice Goodman, and staging by Peter Sellars. Performances in Brooklyn (December 1987) and Washington, D.C. (March - April 1988) will be followed by the European premiere, at Amsterdam's Netherlands Opera, in June.

A "Great Performances" national telecast of the Houston production - with host Walter Cronkite - will air on most PBS-TV stations on Friday, April 15 at 9:00 p.m.

The Elektra/Nonesuch release of Nixon in China was recorded in December 1987 in New York City. The soloists of the original production are featured, with the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Edo de Waart. The opera is available on three compact discs, three albums, or two long-playing chrome cassettes, all with complete notes and libretto.

National release date: April 5.

Contact: Peter Clancy (212) 484-7928.



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JOHN ADAMS

~~Composer in Residence~~  
SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

San Francisco Symphony Composer-in-Residence John Adams <sup>began</sup>~~begins~~ his fourth season with the San Francisco Symphony this fall, having completed three years as the Symphony's New Music Adviser. Of America's newest generation of composers, John Adams is one of the best known and most often performed. Although still in his thirties, Mr. Adams is, in the words of The New Yorker's Andrew Porter, the creator of "a flexible new language capable of producing large-scale works that are both attractive and strongly fashioned. His is a music whose highly polished, perfectly resonant sound is wonderful." In a recent TIME Magazine feature by Michael Walsh, John Adams is described as "the fastest-rising minimalist composer -- and potentially the most influential of all."

In addition to his position as Composer-in-Residence, John Adams is the New Music Adviser to San Francisco Symphony Music Director Edo de Waart. He has also been associated with the San Francisco Conservatory of Music since 1972, and during his tenure there served as head of the composition department and director of the school's highly regarded New Music Ensemble, and commissioned and premiered over 40 new works by American, Canadian and European composers.



John Adams, add one

Born in 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts, John Adams graduated from Harvard University (B.A. magna cum laude 1969, M.A. 1971) where he studied primarily with Leon Kirchner. While a student at Harvard, Mr. Adams was substitute clarinet with the Boston Symphony and performed the New York premiere of Walter Piston's Clarinet Concerto at Carnegie Hall. Since then, he has received two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in 1982.

The San Francisco Symphony's "New and Unusual Music" Series, conceived by San Francisco Symphony Music Director Edo de Waart and implemented by John Adams four years ago, has received national attention and become the model for the current Composers-in-Residence program now in operation with seven major orchestras nationwide. John Adams was one of seven composers selected for a two-year residency and was selected guest speaker with New York Philharmonic Music Director Zubin Mehta in a New York press conference announcing the program. The innovative program was organized and is being administered by Meet the Composer, Inc. with funding provided by Exxon Corporation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

John Adams' music covers a wide range of media from purely instrumental pieces to works for video synthesizer and live-electronics. His 1970 Quintet for Piano and Strings was performed at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont, and his 1973 American Standard has been recorded on Obscure Records, a division of Polydor International. Among other works written during the 1970's are Grounding (1975) for singers, instruments and synthesizer, Onyx (1976) for quadrophonic tape (created on a special synthesizer designed and built by the composer), Saxophone (1976), a videotape



John Adams, add two

collaboration with dancer Margaret Fisher, Phrygian Gates (1977), a work for pianist Mack McCray, and Shaker Loops (1978) for seven strings.

Harmonium, a 30-minute work for chorus and orchestra commissioned by Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony, was given its world premiere in April of 1981 with Mr. de Waart leading the San Francisco Symphony and Chorus in Davies Symphony Hall and will be repeated in subscription concerts this season January 4-7, 1984. The work received its European premiere in February, 1982, when Dennis Russell Davies led the West German Radio Orchestra and Chorus. St. Louis Symphony Music Director Leonard Slatkin led Chicago's Grant Park Orchestra in the work this past July to an audience of 10,000, and the work will be performed by Mr. Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony in Carnegie Hall in March, 1984.

John Adams' Grand Pianola Music, scored for two solo pianos, three sopranos, woodwinds and brass, was also commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony especially for the Symphony's New and Unusual Music Series in February, 1982, and received its European premiere when Edo de Waart and the Concertgebouw Orchestra performed the work in November, 1982. In April, 1983, conductor Michael Tilson Thomas and the American Composers Orchestra will perform the work in Alice Tully Hall, and the New York Philharmonic presents the work in June, 1983.

Composed in 1978, John Adams' Shaker Loops for seven strings was given its premiere in December of that year with Mr. Adams leading the New Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The work, which has been recorded on 1750 Arch Records, was named "Best of the Year" disc for 1981 by The New York Times, SoHo News, and High Fidelity Magazine.

Shaker Loops was recently performed in October, 1982 with Leonard Slatkin conducting the St. Louis Symphony, and Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony open the 1983-84 subscription season with the West Coast premiere

John Adams, add three

of the full string orchestra version September 14, 1983.

John Adams' music has also been performed at the Cabrillo Festival, the Fromm Foundation series at Harvard, the New Hampshire Music Festival and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In October, 1979, he was invited to present two evenings of his own music at the Festival d'Automne in Paris.

Last season, John Adams was commissioned to write a film score for "Matter of Heart," a documentary about C.G. Jung which will be commercially released this year, and he was recently named to the New Music Panel of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Mr. Adams is presently collaborating with the Lucinda Childs Dance Company and Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art to celebrate their September, 1983 opening.

The music of John Adams is published exclusively by Associated Music Publishers, New York.

# # # # #

Recordings:

Shaker Loops and Phrygian Gates

1750 Arch Records S-1784

American Standard

Obscure Records (Obscure #2)  
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# 'Nixon' Is Recorded And Composer Reflects

By WILL CRUTCHFIELD

"Nixon in China" is different from most operas, but just as subject as any to the usual hazards. Yesterday afternoon in RCA's studio A, officials of Nonesuch Records had to huddle with the composer, John Adams, and the conductor, Edo de Waart, to rethink the recording sequence in a big hurry. The session was centered around scenes for Pat Nixon, and the soprano who sings the part, they learned just as they were about to begin, had a cold and couldn't sing.

"We may have to lay down the orchestra and dub her in later" for some passages, "which wasn't the way we wanted to do it," said the president of Nonesuch, Robert Hurwitz. "This reduces our margin of error to almost nothing. The schedule is very tight."

But the luxury of a studio recording for a brand-new American opera is something beside which the incidental problems pale. "Nixon in China," currently playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music after an opening run in Houston, and bound later for Los Angeles and other points east and west, has enjoyed more immediate attention than just about any first opera by any composer since the days of Mascagni or Humperdinck. The final Brooklyn performances are tonight and Thursday; the recording is planned for release in spring 1988.

Before the disruptive news hit, Mr. Adams sat amid the sounds of relentless piano tuning to discuss the new piece that has been so diversely received. (Some have hailed it as a serious dramatic effort and others have

again on "a high-profile recent event with resonances in many different directions." The collaborators are not ready to divulge the topic, but according to Mr. Adams it concerns religious terrorism, "the question of what is God's will, and these people who are willing to die along with their victims because of their sense that there's something better on the other side. There is something immensely poetic and tragic in it."

## 'Psychological Arm-Wrestling'

Is it possible, in Mr. Adams's Minimalist-derived style, to tackle a libretto that is not in some way reflective — to compose music for a taut scene of representational drama? "There were a lot of things in this opera," he says, "that I thought I couldn't do. In the big Mao scene, the dialogue is not exactly advancing the plot, but there's a tremendous amount of psychological arm-wrestling there. When I got the text, I said 'This is just not do-able in my style.' But the great thing about opera is that it forces you to confront challenges like that. I only think I'll get better at it."

Pure Minimalism, with its hypnotic repetitiveness, "is obviously a movement of very limited potential," he said, "and its classic period is not in the past. But it was an important kind of housecleaning. For instance, people," even those who oppose Minimalism, "are not so profoundly offended anymore by tonality and repetition, which are two things that Arnold Schoenberg simply passed canon law against," and which had been intrinsic to music for centuries.

Abandonment of that purity, though, entails the risk of simplistically recapitulating Western music's gradual accretion of complexity. "I worry about that," the composer said, but added that he was wary of the tendency of postwar composers to make their stylistic decision processes "hyper-conscious." At some point, he feels, "I just have to let my music have its own flow. We'll leave it to history to decide whether I wind up as another Menotti."

"That's one way the collaboration with Peter Sellars has been so helpful," Mr. Adams said. "Peter is not a musician, but his musical

ure is one of the things that makes the piece different from most operas.

"I was in college in the 60's," said Mr. Adams, "and I had the standard American perspective on Nixon: The embodiment of establishment venality. I had to rid myself of the caricature as soon as we decided that this would not be a satire. Some of it has elements of caricature — the portrayal of the 'Red Detachment of Women,' for instance, which is such a confusion of misunderstood styles in the original." But the treatment of the former President is both funny and earnest, and, for some viewers, touching.

## 'The Music Is Lost'

Another break with operatic tradition is the amplification used both in Houston and Brooklyn. On that issue, Mr. Adams said: "I feel caught between a rock and a hard place. I feel my text-setting is intelligible, but the orchestration is too rich, maybe, for the words to come across in a big hall. I'm not looking to destroy the tradition of natural singing, but it's best in a more intimate setting. And I really don't like supertitles — I think people tend to keep looking up and down, following all that motion, and the music is lost. In Houston I wouldn't allow them to be used. I believe opera is something that you revisit. That's how we in America can get to know Wagner and Verdi. The audience gets to know the opera. If you think you're going to grasp it all on one night, even by reading the libretto, there's no way."

That chimes with the experience of Mr. Hurwitz: "I have had faith in John's music for a long time," he said yesterday, "and felt a personal connection to it. When I first saw 'Nixon' in Houston, I absorbed about 30 percent of it. It seemed very rich," but only after several more hearings, he said, did he realize that "everything in John's work has come to a fruition in this."

The team responsible for "Nixon in China" as a stage piece — Mr. Adams, the poet Alice Goodman and the director Peter Sellars — is already discussing their next opera,



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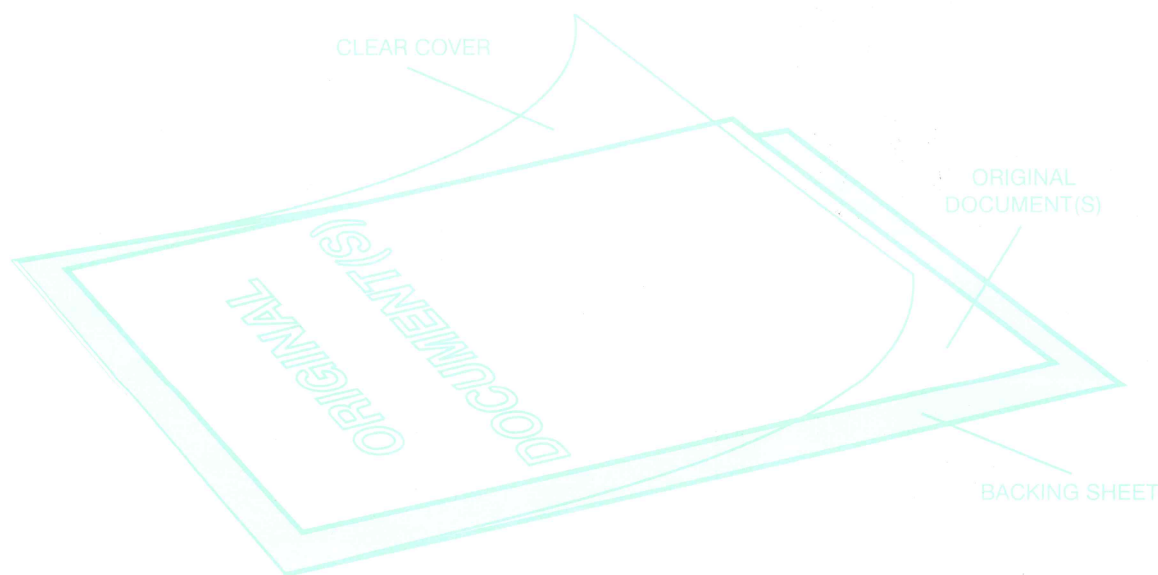
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# MUSICAL EVENTS

## *Nixon in Houston*

**J**OHAN ADAMS' first opera, "Nixon in China," opens at the Brooklyn Academy of Music next week, for seven performances. Later, it will be heard in Washington, Holland, and Los Angeles. The work was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, BAM, and Kennedy Center and was first done in Houston, last month and this, for seven performances. I was at two of them and look forward to hearing the opera again, for it is a successful and stirring musical drama.

Operas whose main characters are famous living people are rare. Although the real-life originals of Léonore and Florestan might have attended Gaveaux's "Léonore" in 1798—J. N. Bouilly, the librettist, claims in his memoirs to have played a Don Fernando role in their perils during the Terror—on the stage they are disguised as Spaniards. But "Nixon in China" is set squarely in Peking on February 21-25, 1972; Mr. and Mrs. Nixon, Dr. Kissinger, and—had she been released from prison for the purpose—Mme. Mao could have attended the Houston première. In Act I, the

Spirit of '76 lands at Capital Airport; Nixon, Chou En-lai, and Kissinger visit Chairman Mao; at a banquet, Chou En-lai proposes a toast and Nixon responds. In Act II, Mrs. Nixon visits a glass factory, a clinic, a pig farm, a school, the Summer Palace, the Ming tombs; the Americans attend a performance of Mme. Mao's ballet "The Red Detachment of Women;" in the final scene (originally Act III, set at the farewell banquet given by the Nixons), Dick and Pat, the Maos, and Chou En-lai remember and recount, in private duologues or monologues, events in the past that have led to the momentous meeting.

"Nixon in China" defies any easy classification. Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" is perhaps the closest parallel—a heroic opera about people on whose personalities and decisions the fate of nations depended—and Handel's "Saul" and Verdi's "Don Carlos" might also be cited: not in any claim that Adams is Mussorgsky's, Handel's, or Verdi's equal but to suggest that his opera is serious in intention. I say "his" because in the last

resort an opera stands or falls by its music, but "Nixon in China" results from what its librettist, Alice Goodman, describes as a polyphonic collaboration. The Diaghilev, as it were, of the enterprise was Peter Sellars, who brought Goodman and Adams together and proposed the subject. A good subject: a meeting—like those of Wotan and Erda in the "Ring" or that of Attila and Leo I, pictured in Verdi's "Attila"—that changed the history of the world. News reports, memoirs, histories provided the basic matter; television tapes provided the basic iconography. Then artistic imagination took over, to shape this raw material into a work of dramatic art. The full resources of grand opera were brought into play. "Nixon in China," like the 1874 "Boris" and the 1867 "Don Carlos," contains a ballet, but not an irrelevant, merely decorative one. Princess Eboli, masquerading as the Queen, appeared at the climax of the "Don Carlos" ballet. In the "Nixon" ballet, Dr. Kissinger plays the villain, and Pat, followed by her husband, intervenes in the action. The opera has choruses, crowd scenes, episodes of spectacle. (The presentation of the long final scene needs rethinking; in Houston it grew visually dull, while high events and ideas were being sung of.) But there is nothing meretricious, no "effects without causes"—Wagner's phrase for the electric sunrise that brought Act III of Meyerbeer's "Le Prophète" to its close.

Goodman's libretto is written in octosyllabic couplets linked, for the most part, by near-rhyme. The metre, flexibly handled, allows a wide range of tones. The first chorus ends:

The people are the heroes now  
Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow  
When we look up, the fields are white  
With harvest in the morning light  
And mountain ranges one by one  
Rise red beneath the harvest moon.

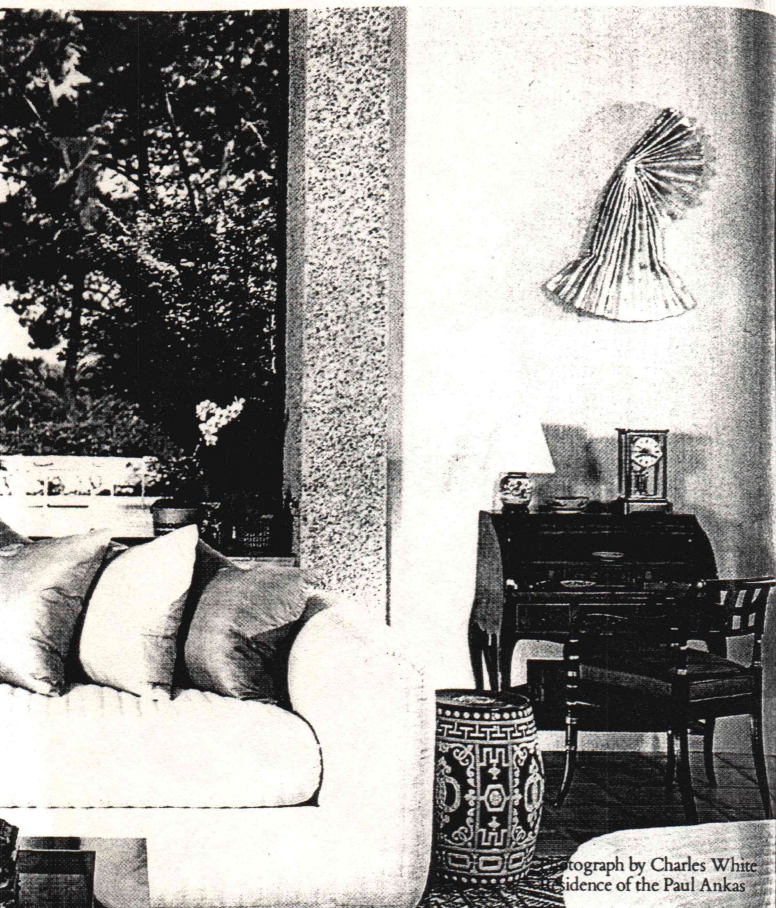
And the final scene contains this exchange between the President and the First Lady:

PAT You won at poker.  
NIXON I sure did.  
I had a system. Five-card stud  
Taught me a lot about mankind.  
Speak softly and don't show your hand  
Became my motto.  
PAT Tell me more.  
NIXON Well, the Pacific theater  
Was not much to write home about.  
PAT Yes, dear. I think you told me that.

The choruses and dialogue of "The







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Into the war.  
Arm this soldier!

In a lecture Goodman invoked Skelton's morality play "Magnyfycence" and Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas" as influences on "Nixon in China." The influence of the first is easier to find, both technically (Goodman could claim of some rough passages, as Skelton did, "For though my ryme be ragged, Tattered and jagged... It hath in it some pyth") and thematically. Her lines are good to sing. And without simplism or glibness she has written philosophical and political speeches for Mao, Chou En-lai, and Nixon in poetry that bears pondering.

The music caught me by surprise, for I thought I'd had more than my fill of Minimalism, and a first glance at the piano-vocal score—an A-minor scale thirty times repeated, over alternate A and F pedals, while upper voices climb the scale more slowly—had been daunting. But Adams' command of mounting tension and slow or sudden release, of clouding and brightening, is so sure that during the performance no tedium set in. There are a few passages where formula becomes insistent. The alternation of dominant-seventh chords and exotic resolutions is perhaps overworked. The alternation of triads with two notes in common (like those that open the last act of "Don Carlos") is protracted for bars on end. Yet the music of "Nixon" became more, not less, interesting on repeated hearings. As the opera proceeds, the writing grows richer, rhythmically freer, more lyrical. Pat's aria in Act II is a number that sopranos will want to lift out for concert repertory. Mme. Mao's triumphant coloratura aria—originally the second-act finale—is a showstopper. In the ballet, there is a romantic pas de deux aspiring to more-than-Minkus rapture—at once a parody and a fond tribute to surefire device. The Red Detachment enters, on point, to a perky tune both funny and exciting. "Nixon" is entertaining as well as serious. The vocal writing gives to each character a distinctive, revealing mode of utterance—of rhythm, of gait, of melodic outline. The orchestration, as always with Adams, is colorful and precisely expressive.

A criticism of the piece may be that

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NOVEMBER 30, 1987

it presents Mr. Nixon in too favorable and romanticized a light. In a program note Goodman writes:

I pondered Nixon's love of history and his belief in peace and progress... I became more and more certain that every character in the opera should be made as eloquent as possible... the heroic quality of the work as a whole would be determined by the eloquence of each character in his or her own argument.

So the opera needs to be heard with critical ears; it doesn't do our thinking for us. For five scenes, it glows with the euphoria engendered by the Peking meeting; only in the last scene do some weariness, wariness, and disillusion set in. Kissinger is cast as a buffo—during the ballet, a lecherous, sadistic buffo—but otherwise there are no villains. Program notes describe Mao as “probably the closest thing to Plato's Philosopher King that this world will ever see” and Chou En-lai as a Lincoln to Mao's Washington. Premier Chou has the last word, in a visionary, beautiful song:

How much of what we did was good?  
Everything seems to move beyond  
Our remedy. Come, heal this wound.  
At this hour nothing can be done.  
Just before dawn the birds begin,  
The warblers, who prefer the dark,  
The cage-birds answering. To work!  
Outside this room the chill of grace  
Lies heavy on the morning grass.

There was a very fine cast, conducted by John DeMain. Carolann Page was a touching Mrs. Nixon. Trudy Ellen Craney was an incisive Mme. Mao, with a rare ability to project distinct vowels high above the staff. John Duykers' Mao, harsh in timbre, was poetic and wise in delivery. James Maddalena's Nixon was buoyant, intelligent, and believable; and, as a colleague put it, “he also communicated something the real Nixon almost never could, a sense of inner life.” Sanford Sylvan filled Chou En-lai's music with a luminous beauty of sound and utterance. Peter Sellars' direction, Adrianne Lobel's sets, Dunya Ramicova's costumes, and James Ingalls' lighting conspired to create a stage action always vital, focussed, at one with the music, the words, the drama as a whole. Mark Morris's choreography was both chilling and funny.

Houston has an admirable creative record. “Nixon in China” was the fourth new American opera it has produced in recent years, and was the second opera to be played in the larger auditorium of the new Gus S. Wortham Theater Center. The first was a

THE NEW YORKER

dreary “Aida.” Something about that, and about the Center itself, later.

At the Met, it was grand opera as usual—no, worse than usual—on the first night of “Il Trovatore,” the second of the season's three new productions. The set, by Ezio Frigerio, is a Svoboda-type staircase—steps, landing, steps, landing, steps, landing—spanning the stage from side to side. It is decked with six large movable columns, two on each landing, and varied backgrounds. Any movements not from side to side must be up or down steps; military marches on the diagonal look particularly clumsy. Each scene in itself is not unhandsome, and swift open-stage changes are what Verdi expected. But operatic décor in his day—illusionistic painted drops and wings—had variety of color and form, and shallow scenes alternated with preset deep ones. Mr. Frigerio's scenery grew monotonous, and on the first night the audience began at last to jeer as the columns heaved into action to cluster into yet another configuration. Most of the singing took place out on the first landing. Its distance from the footlights, the falling away of the stage before it, and the openness all around seemed to make it an acoustically unfavorable place. When the director, Fabrizio Melano, and the designer joined the curtain call, they were booed.

Booing is an ugly sound, but here it reflected recognition that this staging is ill-conceived—inimical to the drama and unhelpful to the singers. The cast needed help. Luciano Pavarotti, who took the title role, is no sort of actor, physically, vocally, or, any longer, verbally. The voice is firm and true, but its bloom has gone. “Ah sì, ben mio” was not melting, and “Di quella pira” was not ringing. Dame Joan Sutherland gave a careful account of Leonora, one that had its moments. A bright flash of coloratura in the first aria and, in the soprano-baritone duet, the word “Vivrà”—just those two notes—showed something of the old power and brilliance. But much of the performance was distressing to anyone who had heard the soprano in her prime. The Azucena, Livia Budai, a Met débutante, also had some good notes, amid many that were hoity, carelessly pitched, and crudely produced. The Luna, Leo Nucci, was also cavalier about pitch—fond of attacking notes from below. His timbre can be quite handsome, but

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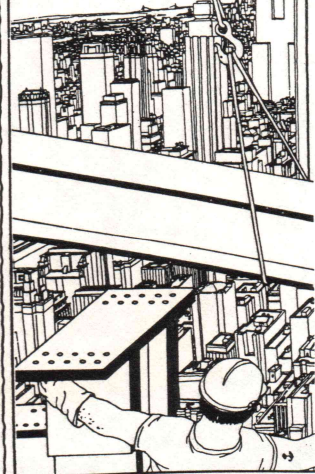
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he was uninteresting. Franco De Grandis made an unimpressive Met début as Ferrando. Richard Bonyng conducted with a sense of tradition adjusted to both the strengths and the shortcomings of his cast.

"Il Trovatore" can still be an exciting opera. As Richard Dyer remarked in the Met program note—amid some more arresting perceptions, none of which found reflection in the performance—"No one today dismisses the music of 'Il Trovatore' as vulgar." This performance made a poor case for it, and for grand opera in general.

THE City Opera season ended with six performances (in four days) of a new double bill: Oliver Knussen's "Where the Wild Things Are" preceded by the Mozart fragment "L'Oca del Cairo." The conductor was Hal France, the director Frank Corsaro, and the designer Maurice Sendak. The "Wild Things," completed in 1983, is Sendak's children's book ingeniously enacted in three dimensions to attractive music openly inspired by Mussorgsky, Debussy's "Boîte à Joujoux," and Ravel's "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges." The plot is a plebeian version of Colette's for Ravel, without its delicacy or moral beauty: a badly behaved little boy has a wondrous adventure. There are tender, poetic episodes in Knussen's score. The "wild rumpus," which should be a climax of the piece, falls rather flat; neither the music nor the slow lumbering of the wild things suggests the "orgy-like explosion of physical energy" prescribed in the libretto. Karen Beardsley was the child. The score was not as vividly played or as well balanced as it is on an Arabesque recording.

Mozart embarked on "The Goose of Cairo" in 1783, sketched a fair amount of the first act, complained—with reason—of the ineptitude of the book, which is by the Abbé Varesco, the librettist of "Idomeneo," and abandoned the thing. There survive two short arias, two duets, a quartet, and the first-act finale, drafted on full-score paper but with only the orchestral introductions, the vocal lines and the bass, and a few instrumental motifs filled in. There are also fifty bars of recitative and forty-eight bars, not autograph, for voice and bass, of a number that starts "Siano pronte alle gran nozze" and breaks off in midphrase. Among various sketches is the melody line of another aria. We have a scenario of the action and the libretto of

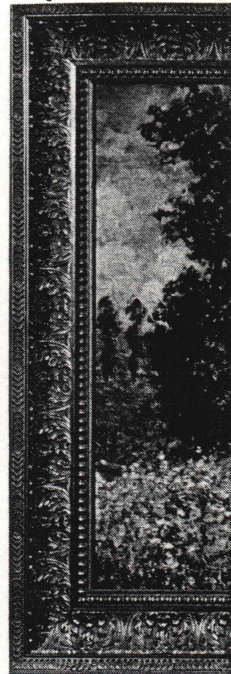
the first act. Various attempts have been made to do something with these fragments. At least three of them combined the "Goose" pieces with those of the also unfinished "Lo Sposo Deluso." A one-act "Oca del Cairo" orchestrated by Virgilio Mortari appeared at Salzburg in 1936 and reached La Scala four years later. Mortari composed new recitatives; he added the finale of the "Posthorn" serenade as overture, the soprano cavatina "Deh, non varcar," the close of the concert scena K. 272, and the trio "Mandina amabile," K. 480. This Mortari version, Englished by Sheldon Harnick, has had a few American productions. The City Opera retains Mortari's musical numbers but drops them into a new, spoken libretto, by Frank Corsaro, performed in Italian. This is Corsaro's plot: singers await the arrival of the music for a new opera; when the pieces arrive, they sing them. Diversion is provided by a crocodile, which enters the rehearsal room and consumes (offstage) a tenor and a guard; and by a large mechanical goose, which "lays" a horrid grimacing mannikin, with tousled wig, who says "Ich bin Mozart" and capers about eagerly through the finale.

Varesco's libretto is clumsy, but it's not as leaden as Corsaro's. Moreover, since the numbers are now divorced from the dramatic context, any music would do. One could have heard real Mozart—plenty to choose from—instead of Mozart-Mortari. There is a difference. Since Mortari made his edition, there has turned up in Bergamo, among Simone Mayr's papers, a score of "Siano pronte": a hundred and sixty-five bars fully orchestrated, a bass solo leading into a trio. The piece is in Mayr's hand and is ascribed by him to Mozart. The Neue Mozart-Ausgabe accepts and publishes it as authentic. My guess is that it is Mayr's completion of a Mozart draft score, now missing, similar to the draft scores of the other "Goose of Cairo" numbers. In that case, only the opening bars would be fully scored by Mozart. A comparison of their bright texture and exuberant figuration with what Mortari invented for the voice-and-bass fragment is revealing.

"L'Oca del Cairo" and "Lo Sposo Deluso" were false steps on the way to "Figaro." The music that survives is worth hearing—but in concert or phonograph performance, or as "dramatic scenes," not as accompaniment to an alien plot.

—ANDREW PORTER

Poplars, c.1875



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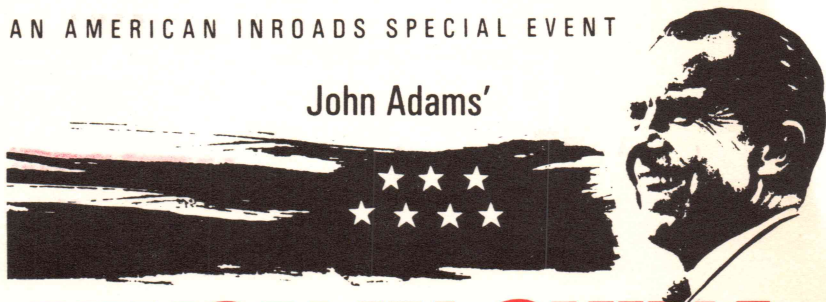




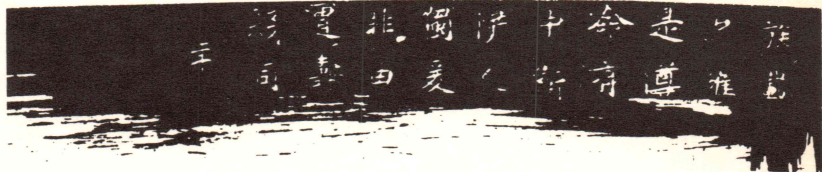


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Rick McFarland

John Duykers as Mao Zedong, second from right, meets with President Nixon, sung by James Maddalena, far right, in the Houston Grand Opera production of "Nixon in China."

## Opera: 'Nixon in China,' in Premiere

By DONAL HENAHAN  
Special to The New York Times

HOUSTON, Oct. 23 — That was it? That was "Nixon in China"? Finally, on Thursday evening, we had the world premiere of the most heavily publicized and shrewdly promoted new opera of this decade. Though grandly proportioned, the Houston Grand Opera production turned out to be a Peter Sellers variety show, worth a few giggles but hardly a strong candidate for the standard repertory.

The evening held unusual promise. The voguish and sometimes roguish Mr. Sellers, instead of employing his directorial talents to revise operas by dead composers, was collaborating this time with a living one, John Adams. The libretto, by Alice Goodman, offered moments of wry humor and poignancy, dealing in a mock-mythic style with President Nixon's peacemaking trip to China in 1972. In prospect, the work had suggested parallels with "The Mother of Us All," the Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein masterpiece that also fondly reflects a moment in American history as if in a funhouse mirror.

The comparison, however, collapsed quickly. "Nixon in China" comes to life, when at all, chiefly through its grab bag of clever scenic effects, such as the descent from the sky over Beijing of the Presidential jet, and by senior-revue jokes at the expense of quasi-historical characters who one might have thought were beyond caricature. Henry Kissinger comes in for fairly harsh ribbing, but a cartoonish Mr. and Mrs. Nixon are objects of mild, campy fun. This Dick and his loyal Pat are innocents abroad, a confused Rotarian couple swept up in incomprehensible events. Miss Goodman's episodic libretto has seriocomic potential, though in performance it was only intermittently understandable despite the composer's reliance on a prosaically chanted recitative style. Despite

### The Cast

**NIXON IN CHINA**, opera in two acts by John Adams; libretto by Alice Goodman; directed by Peter Sellers; conducted by John DeMain; sets designed by Adrienne Lobel; costumes designed by Dunya Ramkova. World premiere. Performed by the Houston Grand Opera at the Wortham Theater Center, Houston.

Nixon .....	James Maddalena
Pat Nixon .....	Carolann Page
Zhou Enlai .....	Sanford Sylvan
Mao Zedong .....	John Duykers
Madame Mao .....	Ellen Craney
Henry Kissinger .....	Thomas Hammons
Mao's secretaries .....	
.....Mari Opata, Stephanie Friedman, Marion Dry	

interesting poetic ambitions, the text remains at heart the material for a good-natured skit, not the political or social satire one might expect.

What comes of it all is a visually striking but coy and insubstantial work. Beneath the lacquered surface there is more lacquer. In spite of chic staging, eye-catching sets and a couple of lively ballet sequences, "Nixon in China" works to redefine the concept of boredom. The basic problem, however, must be placed at the feet of Mr. Adams's score. He writes in a mechanical, modular manner that a fairly intelligent computer could be programmed to duplicate. The score jogs along uneventfully for three hours, rousing itself to a proto-tune or a thickly orchestrated fortissimo now and then, but mostly concentrating on making less out of little. Although described by Adams fans as post-Minimal, the score is given to stating a scrap of the most ordinary musical material and ruminating on it in a static style, much as a novice pianist will work on a single chord until neighbors begin to pound the wall. Mr. Adams does for the arpeggio what McDonald's did for the hamburger, grinding out one simple idea unto eternity. At one point, when

something musical does threaten to take shape, it turns out to be a quotation from Wagner.

Miss Goodman's purposely oblique libretto is a gentle put-on, a fantasy on the theme of Mr. Nixon's famous trip. Accompanied by loyal wife Pat and diplomatic sidekick Kissinger, he meets Zhou Enlai and Mao. He attends a banquet where many toasts to both countries are drunk. Pat ventures outside and sees some people who are not like us. Dick and Pat attend a performance of "The Red Detachment of Women" at the Beijing Opera and somehow become entangled in the violent action, which features a Kissinger look-alike as the villain in a whips-and-chains ballet. The opera tails off into a long, portentous coda in which Dick, Pat, Zhou Enlai, Kissinger, Mao and Madame Mao go to bed in what appears to be a dormitory, capping off the night with meandering soliloquies of enigmatic meaning.

The Houston cast did not transmute fluff into gold, but it performed nobly. The orchestra under John DeMain counted bars accurately, so far as one could tell. James Maddalena suggested the Nixon hunch and flapping arms without actually impersonating Rich Little. Carolann Page, as the pathetically loyal wife, had the First Lady's shy mannerisms down pat, so to say. John Duykers, made up to look like a Mao dummy, had to cope with a vocal line lying a key or two higher than his tenor could smoothly handle. Making a strong vocal impression was not easy in this opera, but Sanford Sylvan as Zhou Enlai displayed a fine, resonant baritone. Trudy Ellen Craney, forced to shout most of the time as Madame Mao, was granted a few moments of bright coloratura in the final scene, and made them tell. Thomas Hammons played Kissinger as a clumsy clod and earned a good share of the evening's laughs. And that, opera fans, was "Nixon in China."





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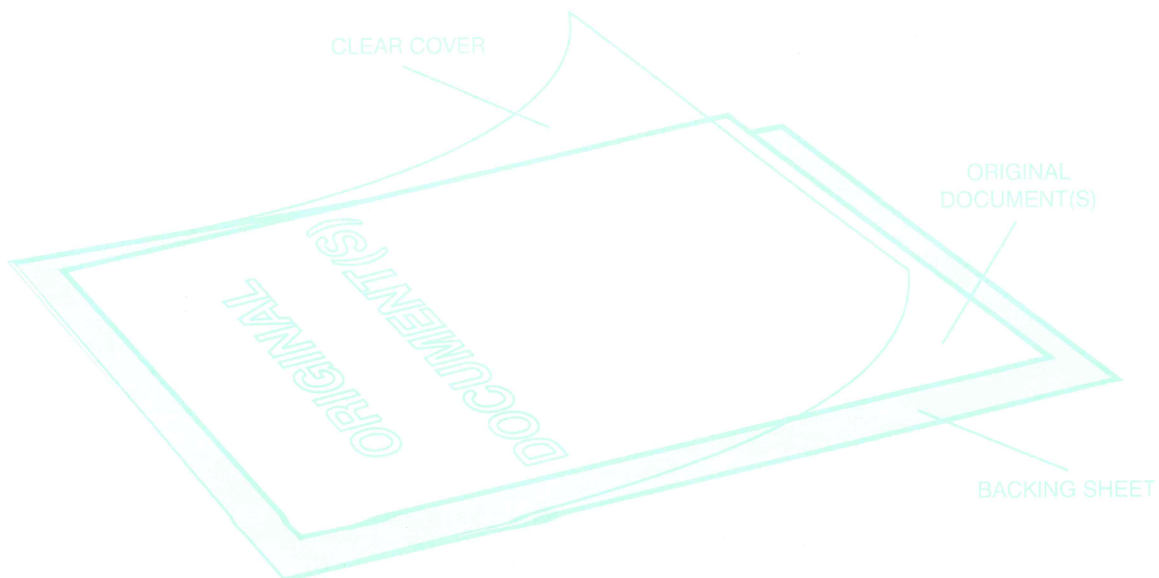
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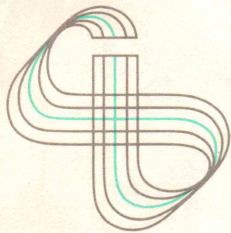
He is survived by his wife, the former Nedda Casson; a son, Richard, of Brookline, Mass.; two brothers, Sam, of Pompano Beach, Fla., and Jack, of

gy. From 1973 to 1976, Dr. Kleban was executive director of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences,

He is survived by his wife, Jacqueline of Manhattan; and a daughter, Dr.

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE...

### JOHN ADAMS

John Adams was born in Worcester, Massachusetts on February 15, 1947 and grew up in Vermont and New Hampshire. During his youth he was strongly influenced by the intellectual and cultural institutions of the New England area, attending Harvard University, where he received both his A.B. and M.A. degrees, and studying with members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra while still an undergraduate. At Harvard he was active as a conductor, a clarinetist and a composer, and his principal teachers included Leon Kirchner, David Del Tredici and Roger Sessions.

Moving to California in 1971, Adams began an active career in the San Francisco Bay Area, teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music (1972-83) and serving as the New Music Adviser and eventually Composer in Residence for the San Francisco Symphony (1978-85). His unique relationship with that orchestra and its music director, Edo de Waart, provided the model for the Meet the Composer Orchestra Residency program which has since sponsored composer residencies in over a dozen orchestras throughout the USA.

John Adams' creative output spans a wide range of media to include works for video, film, the dance, electronic and instrumental music. His compositions for orchestra, however, have brought him the most attention, and such pieces as Harmonium, Grand Pianola Music, Shaker Loops and Harmonielehre have become among the best known and most frequently performed of recent contemporary American music. The New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Baltimore Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic are among the many orchestras who have programmed his works. In December of 1986 BBC Television produced a special program on his work, featuring a full performance of Grand Pianola Music conducted by the composer. In October of 1987 Central Independent Television in England will present an hour-long documentary on Adams and his music, including a complete performance of Harmonium performed by Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Orchestra and Chorus.

The music of John Adams has been recorded on several major international labels. The 1985 recording of Harmonium on ECM received a Grammy nomination for "Best Contemporary Composition" and the Nonesuch Digital recording of Harmonielehre was chosen one of the "Year's Top Ten" classical recordings by both Time Magazine and USA Today. In 1986 Adams signed an exclusive contract with Nonesuch Records who will release six albums of his music over the next four years.

In 1984 John Adams began a collaboration with the stage director Peter Sellars and the poet Alice Goodman resulting in the full-length opera, Nixon in China, commissioned jointly by the Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Nixon in China will receive its first fully staged performances in October of 1987 in Houston and will continue with performances in Washington, D.C., Brooklyn, NY and the Netherlands.

Articles about John Adams have appeared in the New Grove Dictionary of American Music, the 1985 Esquire Register, Music and Musicians and in various issues of Time Magazine, Newsweek, and The New York Times. His music is published by Associated Music Publishers.



# ECM INFORMATION

## John Adams

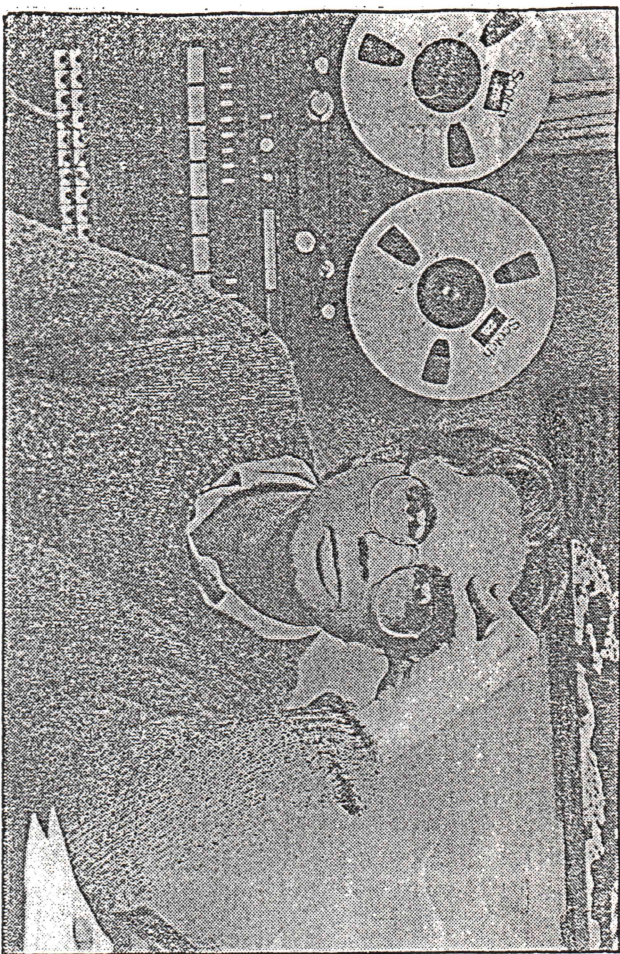
John Adams, born in 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts, grew up in Vermont and New Hampshire. He studied at Harvard College before moving to California where he still resides. Adams has worked in a wide range of media, including electronic music and video, but his instrumental works have brought him the most recognition. These include "Quintet for Piano and Strings" (1970), "American Standard" (1973), "Grounding" (1975), "Onyx" (1976), "Saxophone" (1976), "Phrygian Gates" (1977), "Shaker Loops" (1978) and "Common tones in simple time" (1979). Adams' hour-long synthesizer and brass score for "Available Light" was his contribution to a collaborative effort with choreographer Lucinda Childs and architect Frank Gehry in celebration of the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1983.

Harmonium (ECM 25012), was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, where Adams is Composer-in-Residence, to celebrate the inaugural season of the Louise M. Davies Hall. It features the San Francisco Symphony and Chorus and is conducted by Edo de Waart. Harmonium, the first of Adams' pieces to include text, features three poems--one by 17th-century poet John Donne and two by 19th-century poet Emily Dickinson. Vantage Point describes Harmonium as "...an epic work that combines minimalist principles (steady rhythmic patterns, melodic repetition) with traditional choral practices to create something that is both avant-garde and approachable."

When speaking of his influences, Adams cites, "Monteverdi, Motown, Paul Butterfield, John Coltrane, the Beach Boys, Aaron Copland, things I hear on the street and don't even know the names of--it all feeds the mix." Adams is the creator and director of the San Francisco Symphony's New and Unusual Music Series.



# John Adams: Music of Contradictions



The New York Times/Terrace McCarthy

The composer John Adams, whose "The Chairman Dances," written in 1985, will be performed by the American Composers Orchestra today at 3 P.M. at Carnegie Hall.

By K. ROBERT SCHWARZ

**A**t first glance, the music of John Adams appears to consist of irreconcilably opposed elements. Long an admirer of Minimalism, Mr. Adams has absorbed and personalized a musical language that derives from the work of Steve Reich. Yet he has taken the Minimalist herit- age and dispensed with its old au- sterity, employing its gestures within a highly expressive, almost Romantic context. The unexpected combination of Minimalism and Romanticism that ensues seems, in Mr. Adams's hands, to present no conflict at all.

Perhaps that is because the two sides of Mr. Adams's music reflect two equally different parts of his per- sonality. Like most composers with an abiding interest in Minimalism, Mr. Adams is fascinated with repel- tive rhythmic patterns. "One of my problems as a composer," he admits, is not doing something. "I'm very hy- peractive, and I have to work to create periods of low energy." Yet he is also thoughtful and introspective, spicing his conversation with casual references to Jung and Nietzsche, and that subjective side is equally prominent in his music. Recently, during the composition of his orches- tral work "Harmonelehere" (1984-86), he became fascinated with fin-de-siècle Vienna. "I find great inspira- tion in this period, precisely because of the primacy placed on expres-

sion," he says. Obviously, Mr. Adams is a composer who, despite his attrac- tion to Minimalism, is far removed from that aesthetic's more impersonal elements.

Mr. Adams's personality embraces one more pair of contradictions, be- tween an almost childlike irreverent streak and a sober, self-examining one. Critics have had a tough time ac- cepting the former, a fact that be- came all too evident after the pre- miere of his "Grand Piano Music" (1981-82). "The Chairman Dances" (1985), to be performed by the American Composers Orchestra under Dennis Russell Davies today at 3 P.M. at Carnegie Hall, similarly "presents that side of me which drives people up the wall. They sim- ply can't understand this strange, ironic stance I sometimes have."

The contradictions that comprise John Adams's work were formed dur- ing an immensely eclectic musical upbringing. Born in 1947, Mr. Adams studied with Leon Kirchner and Roger Sessions at Harvard, where he wrote in the acceptable atonal idiom of the 1960's. Soon, however, his path toward modernism was disrupted, partly by his move to San Francisco in 1972. First, he became fascinated with John Cage and chance pro- cesses; next, he experimented with electronics; finally, he discovered the music of Steve Reich.

It was the last that made the most profound impression. "I heard 'Drumming' in 1974 and I was quite astonished by its rigor, because that

was during a period when we were all doing these messy, free-form alen- tioric pieces. A couple of years later I conducted 'Music for Mallet Instru- ments, Voices, and Organ.' I liked the very long, sustained harmonic areas, and then the quick modulations, and that became the generating idea be- hind my own 'Phrygian Gates.'"

"Phrygian Gates" for piano (1977-78) and "Shaker Loops" for string septet (1978) betray Mr. Reich's in- fluence in their repeated patterns but their directionalized sweep and im- passionate climaxes already indicate Mr. Adams's own voice. "What sets me apart from Reich and Glass," Mr. Adams says, "is that I am not a mod- ernist. I embrace the whole musical past, and I don't have the kind of re- fined, systematic language that they have. I rely a lot more on my intuitive sense of balance."

That sense of embracing the histo- rical experience of music became even more evident in Mr. Adams's "Harmonelehere" (1981), scored for huge chorals and orchestra. In "Har- monium," set to texts of Emily Dick- inson and John Donne, the grandiose climaxes and explosive rhetoric re- vealed the subjective, Romantic side of his personality for the first time. Yet listeners who expected "Har- monium" to be followed by another equally exalted work were shocked when "Grand Piano Music" proved to be irreverent and even parodistic, filled with echoes of marching-band music and an almost perverse dia- tonicism. Mr. Adams, however, still

defends "Piano": "I truly love it, and in the long run, people will find more outrageous originality in it than in either 'Harmonelehere' or 'Harmoni- um.'"

New Yorkers soon will be able to judge the different aspects of John Adams's music for the coming months will see the local premieres of "Harmonelehere," "The Chairman Dances," and the three-act opera "Nixon in China."

"Harmonelehere," to be performed in March by the New York Philhar- monic under Leonard Slatkin, refers in its title not only to Arnold Schoen- berg's 1910 harmony treatise of the same name, but to the whole ferment of Viennese Expressionism. Although the outer movements of the 40-minute work still contain pulsing minimal patterns, its central section is one long, anguished cry, embracing a chromatic and tonally vague lan- guage new to Mr. Adams's work. Echoes of Mahler, Schoenberg and Si- belius abound in the piece, but Mr. Adams is quick to insist that they are not used in any quotational sense. "I use the fin-de-siècle language with the consciousness of a modern com- poser, and particularly with my own sensibility, which is very much given to repetitive structures. All of my music has this feeling of *déjà vu*. The issue of vanguardism, the whole avant-garde, has burned itself out. As we approach the end of the century, there is an exhaustion of this intense need to run to the barricades, to forge ahead to the future."

The deeply personal expression of "Harmonelehere" is a far cry, how- ever, from the parodistic antics of "The Chairman Dances." Inspired by a single image from "Nixon in China" — that of Mao dancing with his future bride, the movie star Chiang Ching — "The Chairman Dances" is an amusing mixture of skewed, pulsing fox-trot rhythms and the lush string lines of old Holly- wood films. "The Chairman Dances" is not part of "Nixon in China," Mr. Adams points out. "The music of the opera is drier and more hard-edged than 'The Chairman Dances,' which is a little more plush." In its hilarious reinterpretation of vernacular idioms, "The Chairman Dances" re- lates to the same irreverent world as "Grand Piano Music." Hopefully, listeners will now be willing to take the joke.

And what of the opera with the un- likely title "Nixon in China"? A col- laborative effort with the director Peter Sellars and the librettist Alice Goodman, "Nixon in China" will re- ceive its premiere at the Houston Grand Opera in October 1987, before moving to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in December. Mr. Sellars, who sug- gested the opera's topic, was strongly attracted to both the possibility of "taking mythological characters and presenting them on a human scale" to the potential political statement. Mr. Adams observes with no small amount of satisfaction that "Nixon in China" may surprise many of his ad-

mirers. "It's funny and entertaining, but it's also sympathetic. There may be lots of irony, but there are mo- ments when Pat and Dick are dan- cing together that are truly touching. It's not at all the political hatchet-job that most people expect it's going to be."

But "Nixon in China" also ad- dresses the larger issue of opera's role in contemporary musical life. Rather than seeing a danger in select- ing such a recent topic, Mr. Adams feels that "this is what opera should be doing. The movies, after all, do it all the time. Opera is so completely out of touch in this century. It has lost its relevance to our experience. We hardly need another opera on a Shakespeare play or a Greek myth." And, while "Nixon in China" exam- ines timely political and social issues, it will do so with that mixture of parody and sincerity, of Minimalism and Romanticism, that has become so peculiarly John Adams's own. ■



## THE LIVELY ARTS

TWO SERIOUS (BUT  
NOT SOLEMN) STEPS BEYOND  
MINIMALISM

BY MICHAEL STEINBERG

Six or seven years ago you really had to be in the know musically for the name of John Adams to mean to you something other than the second president of the United States. (Adams, who also bears a presidential middle name, Coolidge, is not part of that famous Adams clan, though he is a New Englander.) In the sixties, when I lived and worked in Boston, I knew him by reputation as a gifted composition student at Harvard who was also a fine clarinetist and conductor. I met him in San Francisco in 1979. He had moved there in 1971 and supported himself for a while driving a forklift at an Oakland warehouse but was by then teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory. He had also formed a friendship with Edo de Waart, then the San Francisco Symphony's music director, and de Waart saw to it that the symphony commissioned a new work from him. With the first performances, in April 1981, of *Harmonium*, settings on a grand scale for chorus and orchestra of poems by John Donne and Emily Dickinson, Adams was on the map as one of the most interesting and important composers in America.

This is the sort of distinction the mainstream audience is apt to ignore, but Adams soon caught on—and not only in San Francisco. *Harmonielehre*, a long and difficult orchestral work, is making the rounds of major American orchestras as



How to classify John Adams's music? "I'm a minimalist," he once said, "who is bored with minimalism."

well as getting played by important orchestras in Japan and Europe. British and Australian radio have paid major attention to Adams. Much of his work is available on records; and Nonesuch, America's liveliest "classical" label, has signed a contract with him to record six albums of his music. That company's initial print run, in May, of their second Adams record, *The Chairman Dances*, was three times the expected lifetime sales figure of a recording of anything by a serious American composer.

The latest from Adams is *Nixon in China*, which is sure to spread his fame even further. It is safe to say that no opera by an American has ever been awaited with such excitement. Introduced at workshop previews in San Francisco in May and scheduled for its official premiere on October 22

by the enterprising Houston Grand Opera (it will help inaugurate the Wortham Theater, their new, \$70 million home), *Nixon* is not yet on the calendars of La Scala and the Vienna Staatsoper, but it is headed for more adventurous houses: the Brooklyn Academy of Music, in December 1987; the Kennedy Center, in March 1988; the Royal Netherlands Opera, in June, with others to follow.

What Adams writes is most often—and most misleadingly—lumped together with the music of Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass and labeled minimalism. Actually,

the "minimalists" are vastly different personalities with equally different gifts. What links them is a musical language characterized first of all by an almost obsessive emphasis on consonance and second by an equal stress on a steady pulse (next to *Nixon in China*, Sibelius and Brahms can seem sandpaper dissonant).

It is music that enters the ear easily, and John Adams is in open and happy rebellion against the fetish that an artistic statement, to be valuable, must be difficult of access. He has a wonderfully flavorful face, with thick glasses and a hint of pixie, topped by a mop of graying hair parted down the middle (a touch, somehow, a American as his name), which falls on his forehead as a pair of horns. It is characteristic for him to look simular







## THE LIVELY ARTS



MARTIN MAMZUR/GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

The most eagerly awaited opera ever written by an American: Adams's *Nixon in China*, due next month in Houston. Above: A preview at the Guggenheim Museum.

who lived the most carefully measured life, knew it was not like that for writers, but contemplating the act of composing music tends to generate clouds. For Adams, composing is more an athletic activity than a mystical one: "If you practice your art you're hot."

John Adams is not solemn, but he takes his work and what it stands for extremely seriously. His words about music, though likely to be pianissimo, are intense. One didn't go to Harvard twenty years ago to learn to write hymnbook harmonies and steady dit-dit-dit-dit-dit rhythmic pulses. Adams made the trek from Cambridge to Oakland as a way of giving himself permission to write the music he heard in his head. Steve Reich—exciting, transporting, poetic, to some; maddening and simpleminded to the point of idiocy, to others—was an inspiration. So was Beethoven, whose luminous major triads also validated for Adams the twelve-tone pioneer Arnold Schoenberg's famous dictum that there was still plenty of good music to be written in C major. (It was Schoenberg whose courageous and inspired explorations of terra incognita had seemed to put the use of C major on the index.)

Adams is puzzled at times by the place of the serious musician in the late twentieth century. "If Milton Babbitt is one of our best composers and I can't understand his music, something is terribly wrong in our culture," he says. Adams, mind you, is far from a know-nothing. He listens to Babbitt, to Elliott Carter, to Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Charles Wuorinen, and others of these widely divergent ilk; he finds much to admire in their work;

but he is not reconciled to musics in which there is "so much emphasis on intellectual decisions. It is ironic that the best musical minds of our time have been drawn to this kind of thinking, and it says something that the last few batches of MacArthur awards, which are much more blue-ribbon than the Pulitzers, all went to 'systematic' composers." For the record, those winners are Conlon Nancarrow, Ralph Shapey, Babbitt, George Perle, and Wuorinen—none a household name, or likely to be.

Adams continues to brood about Carter, obviously too great a figure to be dis-

#### FOR ADAMS, COMPOSING IS MORE AN ATHLETIC ACTIVITY THAN A MYSTICAL ONE.

missed: "He came from a wonderful birth-right: early Roger Sessions, Copland, Ives, jazz; and in his early music you still hear the connection with the American vernacular." Carter's later music he sees as corrupted by the desire to "draw closer to the European bosom, the kinship with Pierre [Boulez]." He talks about that still-greater figure Schoenberg, from whose implausibly comprehensive, Talmudic theoretical-philosophic treatise he borrowed the title *Harmonielehre*. Schoenberg, to him, is "the composer as rabbi, as Old Testament prophet, as antagonist to society—and most of his music is antagonistic."

Adams has long been seen as something more like a white knight. At a question-and-answer session after the first performance of *Harmonium*, a very young composer deplored the ills, real, alleged, and imagined, of the contemporary music

scene and asked Adams if he was the surgeon who could cure those ills. "Well," he answered, "perhaps the masseuse."

Adams worries about the ills he was challenged to heal. He lays his head on the block and maintains that our response to tonal harmonies is not so much cultural as genetic. "Something tremendously powerful was lost when composers moved away from tonal harmony and regular pulses. Among other things the audience was lost." He invokes Walt Whitman: "He has nobility, he was a social radical, and he wrote plain English." Also Dickens, one of his "great inspirations": "He had a huge audience, he had profound compassion, he spoke on social issues—and he wrote for money." So did Handel and Verdi, who brought their musical ideals into harmony with the assumption that it is pointless not to please your audience.

Adams pleases audiences, all right: *Harmonium* at its premiere got as much applause as Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*, which was on the second half. Not all the professional critics have been so sure, especially those to whom exoteric music is as the red rag to the bull. For Adams, simplicity is something to strive for, but his music is not so simple as it sounds to the inattentive critic chiefly concerned with finding the right pigeonhole. His steady musical pulses are lapped in unpredictable patterns, and if you step back so that you become aware of the grand design as well as of the details, you will come upon one rhythmic surprise after another, and the long-range harmonic sweep and energy of Adams's music is the achievement of a master architect. To assume that to use simple



## THE LIVELY ARTS

materials—the steady beat, the uncomplicated chords—condemns you to write what one critic has called “Simple Simonries” is to be bamboozled by the surface. It is like not distinguishing between Mozart and Salieri because they used the same, late-eighteenth-century vocabulary.

The new opera *Nixon in China*, too, is likely to surprise people with the complexities and ambiguities that underlie its simplicities. Peter Sellars, who may have the most original mind in the American theater world today, conceived the idea, and

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### LIKE HANDEL, ADAMS ASSUMES IT IS POINTLESS NOT TO PLEASE YOUR AUDIENCE.

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Alice Goodman, a Harvard contemporary of his (both were there much after Adams), wrote the brilliant and rich libretto. Henry Kissinger is treated without a jot of mercy, but otherwise there is something in the portrayal of each character—the Nixons, the Maos, Chou En-lai—that seems to reveal how each would have seen him- or herself. There is humor, but also compassion and understanding. *Nixon in China* is not a political cartoon; rather, though it contains elements of both the historical and the comic, Adams and his collaborators offer it as heroic and mythic. Hector and Perseus don't get to us anymore, but, Adams said recently, when you say, “Hitler or Donald Duck or Marilyn Monroe”—or Nixon—“any number of buttons in our psyches are pressed.”

The music has its surprises too. *Harnielehre* astonished us all with its middle movement, called “The Anfortas Wound,” in which perky staccatos disappeared, to be supplanted by anguished expressionist lines that invoked the worlds of early Schoenberg and the Sibelius Fourth Symphony. That departure was a springboard for future developments. Act 3 of *Nixon in China*, which shows us these immensely powerful people tired—wondering what has happened to their lives, facing their mortality—stripping them naked, is a similar voyage of musical discovery for Adams, as he spins long, lyric lines and combines them into an intricate contrapuntal web, lit in a soft and melancholy glow. John Adams is on the move. Each building block in his designs may be familiar, but the music is new. It enters the ear easily, but it is insistent about staying in the mind and heart. □

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# CLASSICAL

*On the verge of completing his first opera, John Adams defines a new, eclectic American style.*

## THE MINIMALIST



AMERICAN VERNACULAR, minimalism, and Romanticism do not sound like the most comfortable of bedfellows, but together they form the basis of the musical language of John Adams. Although he has been profoundly influenced by the work of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, Adams, who is a generation younger than those pioneers of minimalism, has purged his musical vocabulary of their brand of austerity and impersonality. Moreover, by combining minimalism with an almost Romantic intensity of expression and by absorbing a variety of popular traditions ranging from band and film music to jazz and rock, Adams has achieved a synthesis not heard in America since Aaron Copland's works of the 1940s.

Adams's rise to prominence has been meteoric, and the critical consensus that he is the most promising American composer of his generation has developed swiftly. Thanks to abundant recordings on several

## WITH THE MOSTEST

BY K. ROBERT SCHWARZ

labels (most recently Nonesuch, with which Adams has signed an exclusive contract), the progress of Adams's career over the past decade can be easily traced. Even a casual survey of those recordings reveals the rapid formation of the composer's distinctive voice.

Born in Massachusetts in 1947, Adams studied composition at Harvard University with Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions, and David Del Tredici. Not surprisingly, he found himself composing in the atonal, highly rationalized manner so favored by our academic institutions. However, Adams's path toward modernism was soon disrupted. To celebrate the completion of his

graduate studies in 1971, Adams's parents presented him with a copy of John Cage's *Silence*. Suddenly, Adams felt his entire academic training called into question. Moving to California in 1971 confirmed his aesthetic about-face, and Adams entered the ferment of

San Francisco's experimental music scene.

Once in California, Adams's musical tastes underwent a series of radical shifts. He first explored Cageian aleatory, some of the fruits of which may be discerned in *American Standard* (1973). Scored for an unspecified ensemble of 12-15 players, *American Standard* combines chance procedures and the egalitarian ideals of Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra with elements drawn from American vernacular. In retrospect, it even shows a predilection for minimalism: The central movement, "Christian Zeal and Activity" (included on Nonesuch 79144), takes a tranquil hymn and, by elongating its harmonies, creates a suspended, almost stat-





ADAMS (LEFT) AND JOHN MCGINN REHEARSING "NIXON IN CHINA" AT THE HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

DAVID ROBERTS/COURTESY HOUSTON OPERA

ic sense of time.

Soon Adams turned to electronics, designing his own synthesizer and composing such tape works as *Onyx* and *Sermon* (both 1976). The latter begins with the voice of a preacher, which Adams progressively divests of meaning by employing repetition, splicing, and layering; its approach to text as pure sound is not too different from such Reich tape pieces as *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966). On Nonesuch 79144, *Sermon* is superimposed upon "Christian Zeal," with the dogmatic tirade of the preacher standing in ironic contrast to the serenity of the hymn.

After a three-year immersion in electronics, Adams experienced his "diatonic conversion." Working with electronics "made me realize the resonant power of consonance," Adams says. "I found that tonality was not just a stylistic phenomenon that came and went, but that it's really a natural acoustic phenomenon. We all learned in college that tonality died, somewhere around the same time that Nietzsche's God died. And I believed it. When you make a dogmatic decision like that early in your life, it takes some kind of powerful experience to undo it, and mine was working with the synthesizer."

Meanwhile, another influence that was to have the most profound effect of all—the music of Steve Reich—had begun to impress itself on Adams. "I heard *Drumming* in 1974 and I was quite astonished by its rigor, because that was during a period when we were all doing these messy, free-form aleatoric pieces," Adams recalls. "A couple of years later, I conducted *Music for Mallet Instruments, Voices, and Organ*. I liked the very long-sustained harmonies and then the quick modulations, and that became the generating idea behind my own *Phrygian Gates*."

Although *Phrygian Gates* (1977), for piano, and *Shaker Loops* (1978), for string septet, reveal Reich's influence, they also mark Adams's independence from the minimalist creed. *Phrygian Gates* (New Albion NA 007) clearly leans toward minimalism in its rigorous structure, steady pulse, static har-

monies, and frequent use of repetitive patterns that expand by an additive process reminiscent of Philip Glass's music. The original modular notation of *Shaker Loops* (septet version on NA 007, string orchestra version on Philips 412 214), which divides each line into a series of repeated melodic cells, similarly has elements in common with minimalism. Yet in their variety of melodic patterns, strong contrasts, and meticulous expressive markings—and in their impassioned climaxes, so far removed from the stasis of minimalism—both *Phrygian Gates* and *Shaker Loops* assert a stylistic direction that is unique to Adams.

*Shaker Loops*, especially, reflects Adams's rejection of the Reichian notion of process music in favor of a more intuitive approach. "What sets me apart from Reich and Glass," Adams states, "is that I am not a modernist. I embrace the whole musical past, and I don't have the kind of refined, systematic language that they have. I rely a lot more on my intuitive sense of balance. I've stopped worrying about whether intuiting a structure is right or not; as far as I can tell, most 19th-century composers wrote on intuitive levels. To me, it's the most exciting way to go, because you don't know what's going to come out on the end of that structure. It's very much like psychoanalysis or solving a crime, where you start with some clue—in my case, an image—and then build on that."

In 1978, Adams was appointed new-music advisor to the San Francisco Symphony, initiating a long and fruitful association with conductor Edo de Waart. Soon Adams attempted his first orchestral composition, *Common Tones in Simple Time* (1979). The composer has aptly summed up the work's ethereal delicacy by describing it as a "pastorale with pulse." Focusing on long, slowly shifting harmonic planes enlivened by a steady pulse, *Common Tones* (Nonesuch 79144) anticipates both the coloristic variety of *Harmonium* (1981) and the interlocking two-piano writing of *Grand Pianola Music* (1981–82).

*Harmonium*, a setting of poems by John Donne and Emily Dickinson scored for large

chorus and orchestra, exposes the subjective, Romantic side of Adams's personality for the first time. Perhaps as a result of the expressive demands of its texts, *Harmonium* (ECM 25012) revels in grandiose climaxes and an expressive rhetoric that is much closer to Romanticism than to minimalism. The poems require a heightened emotional response, and in setting them Adams engages in an immense expansion of his melodic language. As a result, the score's minimal gestures—repeated triadic patterns and pulsing quarter notes—take on a more decorative aspect, providing a shimmering backdrop for the long vocal lines.

Those who expected *Harmonium* to be followed by an equally exalted work were shocked when *Grand Pianola Music* (Angel CDC 47331) proved to be a parodistic mixture of marching-band music, gospel, grandiose Beethovenian piano arpeggios, minimalist repetition, and—at least in the last movement—an almost perverse diatonicism. Still somewhat stunned by the negative critical response to *Pianola*, Adams feels compelled to defend the work: "I truly love it, and in the long run people will find more outrageous originality in it than in either *Harmonium* or *Harmonielehre*. . . . One of the truly tiresome things about contemporary music has been its incredibly dour, humorless quality. One of the things music can do better than any other art form is convey a sense of humor. As soon as you do that, you take yourself down off the heights of Parnassus." Humor is certainly a primary element in *Pianola*, particularly in the obsessively repeated dominant-tonic progressions of the last movement, but *Pianola*'s wittiness should not be allowed to obscure its value. Ultimately, its cultivated synthesis of quintessentially American elements is its most impressive achievement.

While *Grand Pianola Music* displays the irreverent side of Adams's personality, *Harmonielehre* (1984–85) once again manifests the seriousness of purpose and hyper-expressive rhetoric of *Harmonium*. *Harmonielehre* (Nonesuch 79115), a 40-minute orchestral work named after Arnold Schoenberg's 1911 treatise on tonal harmony, succeeds in reconciling the static repetitions of minimalism with the harmonic language and emotional intensity of Viennese expressionism. Although the work's outer movements still contain pulsing minimal patterns, its central section is one long, anguished cry, embracing a chromatic and tonally vague language new to Adams's music. Some listeners may discern echoes of Mahler and Schoenberg, but there are no literal quotations. "I use the *fin-de-siècle* language with the consciousness of a modern composer, and particularly with my own sensibility, which is very much given to repetitive structures."

"All of my music has this feeling of *déjà vu*," Adams declares, before advancing the contention that "the issue of vanguardism, the whole avant-garde, has burned itself out. As we approach the end of the century, there



is an exhaustion of this intense need to run to the barricades, to forge ahead to the future."

Just as *Grand Pianola Music* was in some sense an exorcism of *Harmonium*, the exuberant antics of *The Chairman Dances* (1985) serve as a mischievous repudiation of *Harmonielehre*'s spiritual turmoil. Recorded on Nonesuch 79144, together with such other recent orchestral pieces as *Tromba Lontana* and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (both 1986), *The Chairman Dances* reveals that Adams can distill his musical thought into brief, exhilarating, often amusing vignettes without compromising either his craftsmanship or the music's stylistic integrity. Inspired by a single image from Adams's forthcoming three-act opera *Nixon in China*—that of Mao Tse-tung dancing with his wife, former movie star Chiang Ching—*The Chairman Dances* deftly combines minimalist pulsing and fox-trot rhythms with the characteristically lush, sentimental violin lines of old Hollywood films.

*Nixon in China*, a collaboration with director Peter Sellars, librettist Alice Goodman, and choreographer Mark Morris, is scheduled to receive its premiere with the Houston Grand Opera in October, then move to the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival in December and Washington's Kennedy Center in March, 1988. An advance peek at the opera reveals a surprisingly human, sympathetic portrayal of its

principal characters. "There may be lots of irony, but there are moments when Pat and Dick are dancing together that are truly touching," says Adams. "It's not at all the political hatchet job that most people expect it's going to be. . . . The opera is about extraordinary human beings caught in a tangle of personal and historical events. We've been calling the opera 'mythic,' and I think it does contain a lot of myths. Nixon and the whole idea of self-righteousness and greatness and historical necessity—those are all very classic American myths. Mao created his own myth by burying myths that were thousands of years old."

Adams sees *Nixon in China* as "a consummation of all the different kinds of musical language that I've used in the last ten years." Yet the increasing prominence of American vernacular elements, particularly rock, suggests new directions for Adams's work. "Nixon's aria has a musical and rhythmic structure that really is just like a rock song," Adams points out, "and that's very exciting for me. That's going to be a bellwether of my future pieces—an even more stripped-down harmonic language."

Adams's interest in rock is indicative not only of the course his career may take in the years to come but also of his basic cultural view. Although he has been faulted for the seeming dichotomy between "serious" works such as *Harmonielehre* and "popular" ones such as *The Chairman Dances*, it is be-

coming clear that no stylistic disparity really exists in Adams's works. Instead, like Copland, Adams has only one style, whether he is reaching for the grand statement or simply trying to entertain his audience. Robert Hurwitz, vice-president and general manager of Nonesuch (and Adams's producer), comments that "what makes *The Chairman Dances* go is not only the wit and irony and sense of nostalgia, but the irresistible sense of energy of the musical language. That same language can be heard not only in *Pianola* but in *Harmonielehre*. Some 'serious' composers can, with a flick of the wrist, write one piece that sounds serious and another that sounds popular, but rarely do both sound like the same composer. Whether it is *The Chairman Dances* or *Harmonium*, it always sounds like John's music."

Adams's entire creative output repudiates the elitist belief that a "serious" composer should be isolated from American culture. In fact, the absorption of all aspects of American vernacular into his music presents the heartening picture of a composer who is very much a part of American society. From post-Romantic symphonic music to the rigors of minimalism, from the nostalgia of film music and marching bands to the simplicity of rock, Adams freely selects, combines, and synthesizes. That very openness makes him heir to the tradition of Gottschalk, Ives, Copland, and Reich. It also brands him as a distinctively American composer. ■

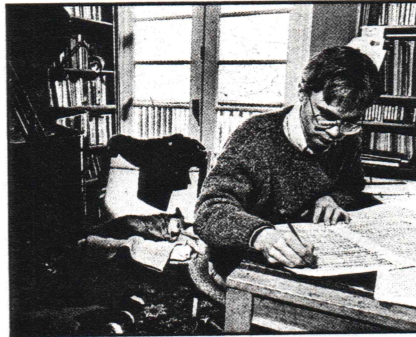


# F·A·C·E·S

## John Adams

### *Taking Minimalism to the Max*

Composer John Adams never actually called himself "a minimalist bored with minimalism," but he doesn't deny the aptness of a quote that has followed him for years. Like Philip Glass and Steve Reich, Adams rose from the avant-underground to the concert halls with a style using pulsation, tonality and slow harmonic changes. Unlike them, he allows romantic flourishes of melody and orchestration to temper the hypnotic repetition. "I know that Phil and Steve bristle every time they're called minimalists," Adams says, "but I think it's a very helpful term. It's not so much a style as an approach."



Approaching the New York opening of his first opera, *Nixon in China*, Adams feels "like the Queen Mother: I have this royal child that everyone is dying to get a peek at, and half the world just can't wait to bash." Initial reactions ranged from "mush" to "masterpiece"; the debate comes home as PBS airs *Nixon* in April and Nonesuch Records releases the opera.

A soft-spoken man who retains the reserve of his New England roots, Adams' more controversial asides—"I think the classical symphonic world is just brain dead"—are as disarming as his background. A *magna cum laude* graduate from Harvard at the height of 12-tone academania, he left for more experimental work at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Among his efforts there were 1973's "American Standard" (for Brian Eno's *Obscure* music series), which included music and "wacky" radio conversation five years before Eno and David Byrne's similar *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. He also spent a year studying electronics so that he could build a synthesizer from scratch.

After "Harmonium" brought him national attention in 1980 ("My 'hit,'" Adams says wryly), the parodistic "Grand Pianola Music" met with vehement criticism. "It was a kind of trickster piece," he says now. "I have that side to me which is very ironic, a misbehaving side. It's the side that drives straight music people up the wall."

Such listeners may quake at the thought of three Mao-ettes on an opera stage adding a soft-funk chorus to the statements of the Chairman. But Adams, who cites Monteverdi, Motown and "things I hear on the street and don't even know the names of" as influences, won't let that stop him. "In this century, it's become de rigueur, if you're a serious composer, that you purify and refine the language. I once described myself as a composer with a very loose filter. You can hear everybody else's music in mine." —Marianne Meyer



Adams

# Opera: 'Nixon In China'

By JOHN ROCKWELL

THE opera "Nixon in China" received its world premiere in October by the Houston Grand Opera. At that time it was much written about, and the range of opinion was extreme. Conservatives denounced or dismissed it tooth and claw. Progressives hailed it, sometimes extravagantly. Modernists were confused, most of them doted on Peter Sellars, the director, but dislike Minimalism, the stylistic school from which the composer, John Adams, emerged.

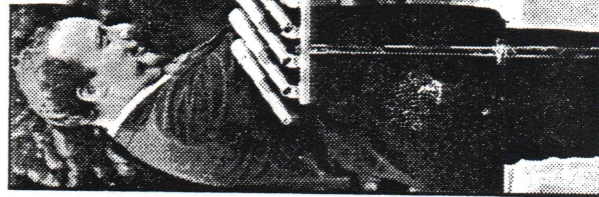
Whether a full-scale reassessment is warranted this soon, on the occasion of the opera's New York premiere Friday night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, seems debatable. But different perspectives bring different opinions, and in any event, along with the elements brought up from Houston, there was a new chorus, a new orchestra and a new conductor on hand for the New York run, which continues through Dec. 17.

So let be said that this writer—who has mixed feelings about Mr. Sellars and loves the precepts (if not every manifestation) of Minimalism—had a terrific time. To this taste, "Nixon in China," while not perfect, is a stirring creation, full of charm and wit and, in the end, beauty. Unlike so many new operas, grimly earnest or shiniingly trendy, this one's likely to last.

Chief among its flaws is a structural, dramaturgical one: a tendency to lapse in the first four scenes (there are six all told) into long, declamatory arias. This reflects, perhaps, the poetic, introspective bent of the librettist, Alice Goodman, and Mr. Adams responds with music that, while full of instrumental ingenuity, tends to fall back on recitative-like vocal lines.

## The New York Times

DECEMBER 6, 1987



John Maddalena, left, as Richard Nixon, Sanford Sylvan as Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and Carolann Page as Pat Nixon in John Adams' opera "Nixon in China."

Martha Swope

Mr. Adams's music is his finest yet. Some of the vocal lines may shy clear of the real melody Mr. Glass has achieved in his operas. But the vocal ensembles are exquisitely done, and the instrumental writing is masterly. In his "Grand Pianola Music," Mr. Adams revealed a penchant not just for the linkage of Minimalism and the American symphonic school, but of Minimalism and vaudevilian wit. All this serves him in good stead here, and the niceties of orchestration and the cleverness of much of the musical commentary upon the drama are lovely indeed.

Edo de Waart, a longtime associate of Mr. Adams's when both were at the San Francisco Symphony, conducted with real confidence, sweeping the score along with precision and finesse. The Orchestra of St. Luke's played excellently, and the chorus assembled for this run sang and acted stalwartly. The principals, most of them part of Mr. Sellars' longstanding Boston ensemble, were the same as in Houston, and they were superb — James Maddalena as Nixon, Carolann Page as Pat, John Duykers as Mao, Trudy Ellen Craney as his wife, Thomas Hammons as Kissinger and Sanford Sylvan as an especially touching Zhou.

That staging device, like much else here, seems borrowed from Mr. Wilson, which is not a bad source. Altogether, this is Mr. Sellars's most effective staging of the several this writer has seen, clever yet not cut off from emotion. In this he is aided by simple yet telling sets and costumes from Adrienne Lobel and Dunya Ramicova, and above all by the witty, lyrical choreography of Mark Morris (who was presumably also a contributor to much of the stylized movement apart from the ballet sequences proper).

For all its seeming contemporaneity, as a documentary report on the Nixon's visit to China in 1972, this work is part of what might be called the exotic-icon branch of present-day opera. The genre also includes Roger Sessions's "Montezuma" and Robert Wilson's (mostly nonmusical) "Life and Times of Joseph Stalin," along with Philip Glass's "Satyagraha" and "Akhnaten" and the Glass-Wilson "Einstein on the Beach." These works substitute dream-visions for conventional narrative plotting, but

Ms. Goodman's long speeches offer the worst of both worlds. But that, and an occasional tendency of Mr. Adams to revert to Minimalist clichés and the persistent veil of amplification throughout, is about all that is wrong with this opera. Ms. Goodman's libretto strikes a lovely balance between caricature, ironic sentimentality and more deeply felt truths, and reaches a real transcendence in the last two scenes.

The penultimate one begins as a performance for the Americans of that archetypal opera of the Cultural



# Recording 'Nixon in China'

By WILL CRUTCHFIELD

"Nixon in China" is different from most operas, but just as subject as any to the usual hazards. Yesterday afternoon in RCA's studio A, officials of Nonesuch Records had to huddle with the composer, John Adams, and the conductor, Edo de Waart, to rethink the recording sequence in a big hurry. The session was centered around scenes for Pat Nixon, and the soprano who sings the part, they learned just as they were about to begin, had a cold and couldn't sing.

"We may have to lay down the orchestra and dub her in later" for some passages, "which wasn't the way we wanted to do it," said the president of Nonesuch, Robert Hurwitz. "This reduces our margin of error to almost nothing. The schedule is very tight."

But the luxury of a studio recording for a brand-new American opera is something beside which the incidental problems pale. "Nixon in China," currently playing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music after an opening run in Houston, and bound later for Los Angeles and other points east and west, has enjoyed more immediate attention than just about any first opera by any composer, since the days of Mascagni or Humperdinck. The final Brooklyn performances are tonight and Thursday; the recording is planned for release in spring 1988.

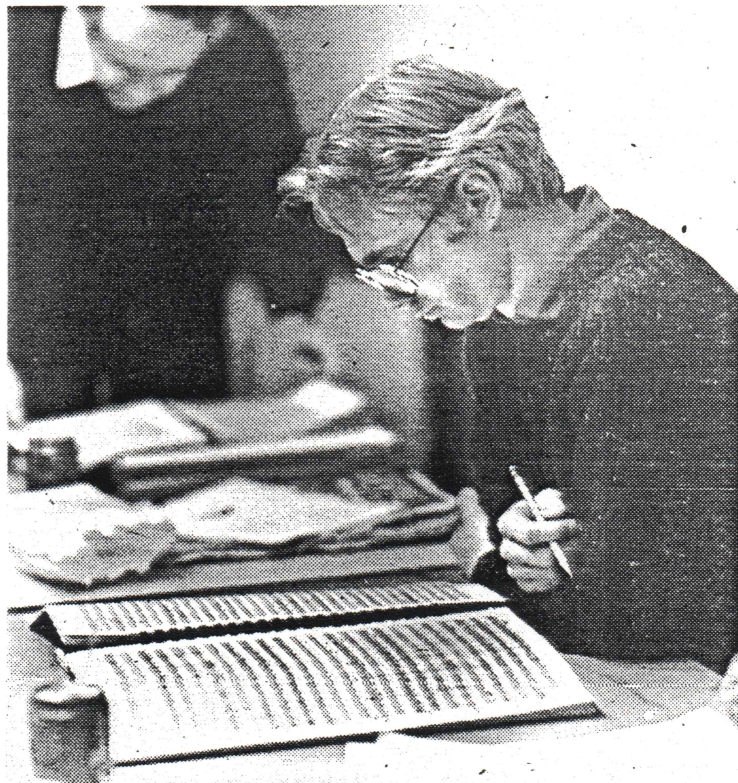
Before the disruptive news hit, Mr. Adams sat amid the sounds of relentless piano tuning to discuss the new piece that has been so diversely received. (Some have hailed it as a serious dramatic effort and others have heard empty doodling. "That was it?" asked the Times music critic Donal Henahan after the Houston premiere.)

Treatment of a living historical figure is one of the things that makes the piece different from most operas.

"I was in college in the 60's," said Mr. Adams, "and I had the standard American perspective on Nixon: The embodiment of establishment venality. I had to rid myself of the caricature as soon as we decided that this would not be a satire. Some of it has elements of caricature — the portrayal of the 'Red Detachment of Women,' for instance, which is such a confusion of misunderstood styles in the original." But the treatment of the former President is both funny and earnest, and, for some viewers, touching.

## 'The Music Is Lost'

Another break with operatic tradition is the amplification used both in Houston and Brooklyn. On that issue, Mr. Adams said: "I feel caught between a rock and a hard place. I feel my text-setting is intelligible, but the orchestration is too rich, maybe, for the words to come across in a big hall. I'm not looking to destroy the tradition of natural singing, but it's best in a more intimate setting. And I really



The New York Times/Neal Boenzi

John Adams, composer of "Nixon in China," at recording session.

**'I believe opera is something that you revisit.'**

John Adams,  
Composer

don't like supertitles — I think people tend to keep looking up and down, following all that motion, and the music is lost. In Houston I wouldn't allow them to be used. I believe opera is something that you revisit. That's how we in America can get to know Wagner and Verdi. The audience gets to know the opera. If you think you're going to grasp it all on one night, even by reading the libretto, there's no way."

That chimes with the experience of Mr. Hurwitz: "I have had faith in John's music for a long time," he said yesterday, "and felt a personal connection to it. When I first saw 'Nixon' in Houston, I absorbed about 30 percent of it. It seemed very rich," but only after several more hearings, he said, did he realize that "everything in John's work has come to a fruition in this."

The team responsible for "Nixon in China" as a stage piece — Mr. Adams, the poet Alice Goodman and

the director Peter Sellars — is already discussing their next opera, again on "a high-profile recent event with resonances in many different directions." The collaborators are not ready to divulge the topic, but according to Mr. Adams it concerns religious terrorism, "the question of what is God's will, and these people who are willing to die along with their victims because of their sense that there's something better on the other side. There is something immensely poetic and tragic in it."

## 'Psychological Arm-Wrestling'

Is it possible, in Mr. Adams's Minimalist-derived style, to tackle a libretto that is not in some way reflective — to compose music for a taut scene of representational drama? "There were a lot of things in this opera," he says, "that I thought I couldn't do. In the big Mao scene, the dialogue is not exactly advancing the plot, but there's a tremendous amount of psychological arm-wrestling there. When I got the text, I said 'This is just not do-able in my style.' But the great thing about opera is that it forces you to confront challenges like that. I only think I'll get better at it."

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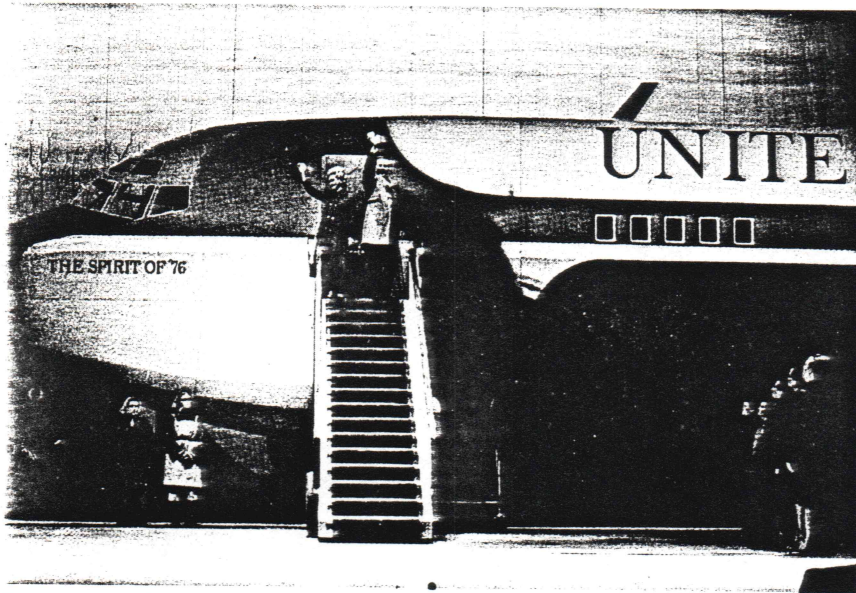


Pure Minimalism, with its hypnotic repetitiveness, "was obviously a movement of very limited potential," he said, "and its classic period is now in the past. But it was an important kind of housecleaning. For instance, people," even those who oppose Minimalism, "are not so profoundly offended anymore by tonality and repetition, which are two things that Arnold Schoenberg simply passed canon law against," and which had been intrinsic to music for centuries.

Abandonment of that purity, though, entails the risk of simplistically recapitulating Western music's gradual accretion of complexity. "I worry about that," the composer said, but added that he was wary of the tendency of postwar composers to make their stylistic decision processes "hyper-conscious." At some point, he feels, "I just have to let my music have its own flow. We'll leave it to history to decide whether I wind up as another Menotti."

"That's one way the collaboration with Peter Sellars has been so helpful," Mr. Adams said. "Peter is not a professional musician, but his musical perception is fantastically acute."





From impersonal panoply to hallucinatory intimacy: *Nixon in China*

## Stagecraft as Soulcraft

*Nixon, Mao and Chou En-lai meet again—in Houston*

It is the most eagerly anticipated, and potentially incendiary, musical premiere of the year: an opera about Richard Nixon's landmark visit to the People's Republic of China that also includes Pat Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai among its cast of characters. Although it is sure to provoke strong emotions and conflicting opinions, *Nixon in China*, currently on display at the Houston Grand Opera, is the most important new opera since Philip Glass gave voice to Mohandas Gandhi in *Satyagraha* seven years ago.

At first glance *Nixon* seems an unlikely subject, treated by an equally unlikely trio of Harvard graduates. Composer John Adams, 40, a minimalist of burgeoning popular appeal, had never written an opera before; Poet Alice Goodman, 29, had never written a libretto; and Director Peter Sellars, 30, was notorious for brassily upstaging the classics, setting Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Spanish Harlem and Handel's *Orlando* partly on Mars.

*Nixon*, however, emerges as neither a political cartoon nor a satire. Instead, it is a daring, complex and ultimately successful examination of the moment in 1972 when West met East on the tarmac at Peking, a heroic opera for an unheroic age. Although historical operas are not unusual (Verdi's *Don Carlos*, for example), it is rare for a new work to treat personages of such recent vintage. The topic is resonant, for

the former President still arouses potent emotions in those whose political consciousness was forged by Viet Nam, Kent State and Watergate. But the Minnesota-born Goodman was only ten years old when Nixon was elected and 16 when he resigned; now living in England, she brings a welcome apolitical detachment to her first major work.

Progressing from the impersonal panoply of statecraft to an almost hallucinatory intimacy of soulcraft, the libretto depicts Nixon as emotionally repressed and socially awkward but acutely aware of his role in history. Mostly written in couplets, the lyrics may sometimes be elliptical, but they are psychologically observant and very singable.

Adams, who a decade ago was writing



In his study, Mao (Duykers) confronts Nixon (Maddalena)  
*Beethoven, Strauss and even a little Glenn Miller.*

minimalist essays in broken chords and chugging rhythms, has evolved a more flexible, conventional tonal language, fleshed out with references to past masters (Debussy, Beethoven, Richard Strauss) and even Glenn Miller, as the dramatic situation demands. There has always been a theatricality about Adams' music—the 1981 *Harmonium* was a vivid choral setting of poetry by John Donne and Emily Dickinson—and in *Nixon* its dramatic qualities have flowered. The figures are sharply characterized: Nixon (James Maddalena), for example, is a gruff baritone whose music is often stiff and halting, while Chairman Mao (John Duykers) is cast as a heldentenor. His body may be weak, but his mind and voice are as vigorous as Siegfried's.

The big tableaux are cannily staged by Sellars, doing his cleanest operatic work in years. The banquet scene in the Great Hall of the People that concludes the first act becomes a brilliantly calibrated choral scene in which toasts of comradeship are punctuated by popping flashbulbs and delirious, crashing chords. "It's like a dream," sings Nixon, and suddenly the picture freezes, as if the hold button had been pressed on a VCR.

The highlight, though, is the Nixon's night at the ballet, where they see a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*. Here reality dissolves completely, as first Pat and then Dick is drawn into the politicized morality play onstage. Insouciantly choreographed by Mark Morris in mock socialist-realist style, the dance is a dizzying montage of whirling rifle butts and flashing thighs. The scene builds in energy until, at its climax, Madame Mao suddenly rises and launches into a spitfire aria, "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung," that ends in a blaze of coloratura glory.

The contemplative final scene is a series of interconnected monologues and dialogues set in discrete bedrooms on the last night in Peking. Nixon reminisces about his war service, unable to transform his blustery bonhomie into a real avowal of love for his wife; Mao and his wife recall their early days together; the solitary Chou, the power behind the throne, contemplates the revolution. Television icons all, the figures are sliced open to reveal small and lonely human beings.

Despite a sharply divided critical reception, the opera appears to have a bright future. Co-commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (where it will be recorded) and the Kennedy Center, the production will travel to the Netherlands Opera next June and the Los Angeles Music Center Opera in 1989. Like a good politician, it deserves to run for a long time. —By Michael Walsh



John Adams

# First Flight

BY KYLE GANN

There are small birds that build their nests in holes in the precipitous banks of Wyoming's Snake River. Each baby bird, when he leaves the nest, is forced to shoot 60 feet straight out to the opposite bank on his first flight ever, or else crash and drown. John Adams, who wrote his first opera under unprecedented media pressure, must know how those fledglings feel. When was the last time a musical reputation so hung on one work?

Let no criticism that follows detract from the fact that Adams's maiden theatrical flight is a triumph. *Nixon in China* is a profound puzzle and—here's the trick—a solid evening's entertainment. It may miss being the Great American Opera, but not since *The Mother of Us All* has an opera come so close to one's fondest hopes for what American opera could be. Leighton Kerner detailed *Nixon's* dramatic aspects in his November 17 review of the Houston Grand Opera production, which BAM imported. It would be redundant for me to echo his praise of the cast, sets, and direction, but Adams's insights into minimalist opera invite further comment. I'm sure he doesn't feel like it, but Adams comes off looking like the naïf who sheepishly wonders, under the star-tled stare of 20,000 eyes, why everyone thought it was so difficult to write an opera.

First, credit where due. The night I attended (December 6), Adams didn't run onstage for his applause (good for him, it's an awkward, pointless ritual), but perhaps Philip Glass should have taken a small bow. If Monteverdi stood on the shoulders of Peri and Caccini to invent

opera, Adams isn't shy about his equal indebtedness. The arpeggiated chords and harmonic changes over a pivot note can be traced to any Glasswork after *Einstein on the Beach*, and the final scene, in which Chou En-lai remains upright as the rest of the cast dozes off and the music dies away, is a clean lift from Gandhi's final solo in *Satyagraha*. Handel himself couldn't have engineered a more dexterous theft, though Adams's syncopations and dotted notes reveal that he is as bored with Glass's rhythms as anyone.

Adams's ingenuity shows in what he does with Glass's devices. The danger with minimalist textures (as the narrated parts of the new *Akhmatov* recording evince) is that they can sound like background to a melody that won't show up. Fine, says Adams. Put that pedestal in the pit where it belongs, bring the bust back onstage; the sung libretto will be the melody minimalist has been waiting for. Scales rise, the chorus starts singing, and before you can say "phase shifting," what the '60s glorified as *process* is relegated to the more modest (and thoroughly defensible) role of *accompaniment*. Why hadn't anyone thought of it before?

Adams makes the style work for him in many ways. He bends Alice Goodman's ravishingly poetic libretto to the music by fragmenting it into Gertrude Steinian enigmas. Treatment of the English language, disgracefully handled in most American operas, is here the focal point that unites musical and textual ideas. Overcome by the historicity of his

## MUSIC

meeting with Chou, an excited Nixon stutters, "News, news, news, has a, has a, has a, has a mystery, a mystery!"; and minimalism's hiccups and reiterations seem created for this moment. As if to drive home the Chinese emphasis on collectivity, the most stunning music is given to the chorus: one soft, hypnotic

# the village VOICE

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MARTHA SWOPE

**Nixon and Chou: a human opera, full of characters one admires, fears, pities**

chant—"The people are the heroes now! Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow"—sets the tone and reverberates until the final curtain. At once bold and cautious, Adams backs off from the free-form romanticism of *Harmonielehre*, but he does edge toward nonminimal styles, and the closing scene's sultry fox-trot evokes a summit dissipated in disillusion.

If *Nixon* has a conspicuous flaw, it's that the text is more subtle than the subtext the music shoves under it. The orchestra's incessant momentum implies that these characters, powerful yet at the mercy of their appetites, are caught up in world events they can nuance, but not control; their vocal lines color the harmony, but the rhythm grinds on willy-nilly. During the Nixon-Kissinger-Mao meeting, one wishes the music would pause and give Goodman's attempt at an "opera of ideas" some breathing room, time to provoke thought. How potent, how stupefying an effect it would have been if Mao, unlike Nixon, had been able to stop the

music in its tracks with a single, unfathomable word! The text pointed that way, and someone as close to Mozart as to Glass might have taken the hint.

But such "what ifs?" have the benefit of hindsight, and Adams's perceptions of minimalism's potential are sufficiently astounding. The debt to Glass isn't kindly repaid; *Nixon* makes one suddenly realize that minimalist opera can be fun. It's one thing to piously marvel at what a swell guy Gandhi was, another to see Mao hug Nixon as you would a precocious teenager, muttering, "*Six Crises* isn't a bad book." Not worried about his modernist credentials, Adams has relaxed into a human opera, full of characters one admires, laughs at, fears, and pities, and this wealth of alternate readings keeps the imagination active. Aside from Beethoven, Berg, and Debussy, how many composers have written a *debut* opera this absorbing? Adams may have found his groove. We look forward to *Gorbachev* in Washington. ■



## MUSICAL EVENTS

*Nixon in Houston*

**J**OHN ADAMS' first opera, "Nixon in China," opens at the Brooklyn Academy of Music next week, for seven performances. Later, it will be heard in Washington, Holland, and Los Angeles. The work was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, BAM, and Kennedy Center and was first done in Houston, last month and this, for seven performances. I was at two of them and look forward to hearing the opera again, for it is a successful and stirring musical drama.

Operas whose main characters are famous living people are rare. Although the real-life originals of Léonore and Florestan might have attended Gaveaux's "Léonore" in 1798—J. N. Bouilly, the librettist, claims in his memoirs to have played a Don Fernando role in their perils during the Terror—on the stage they are disguised as Spaniards. But "Nixon in China" is set squarely in Peking on February 21-25, 1972; Mr. and Mrs. Nixon, Dr. Kissinger, and—had she been released from prison for the purpose—Mme. Mao could have attended the Houston première. In Act I, the

Spirit of '76 lands at Capital Airport; Nixon, Chou En-lai, and Kissinger visit Chairman Mao; at a banquet, Chou En-lai proposes a toast and Nixon responds. In Act II, Mrs. Nixon visits a glass factory, a clinic, a pig farm, a school, the Summer Palace, the Ming tombs; the Americans attend a performance of Mme. Mao's ballet "The Red Detachment of Women;" in the final scene (originally Act III, set at the farewell banquet given by the Nixons), Dick and Pat, the Maos, and Chou En-lai remember and recount, in private duologues or monologues, events in the past that have led to the momentous meeting.

"Nixon in China" defies any easy classification. Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" is perhaps the closest parallel—a heroic opera about people on whose personalities and decisions the fate of nations depended—and Handel's "Saul" and Verdi's "Don Carlos" might also be cited: not in any claim that Adams is Mussorgsky's, Handel's, or Verdi's equal but to suggest that his opera is serious in intention. I say "his" because in the last

resort an opera stands or falls by its music, but "Nixon in China" results from what its librettist, Alice Goodman, describes as a polyphonic collaboration. The Diaghilev, as it were, of the enterprise was Peter Sellars, who brought Goodman and Adams together and proposed the subject. A good subject: a meeting—like those of Wotan and Erda in the "Ring" or that of Attila and Leo I, pictured in Verdi's "Attila"—that changed the history of the world. News reports, memoirs, histories provided the basic matter; television tapes provided the basic iconography. Then artistic imagination took over, to shape this raw material into a work of dramatic art. The full resources of grand opera were brought into play. "Nixon in China," like the 1874 "Boris" and the 1867 "Don Carlos," contains a ballet, but not an irrelevant, merely decorative one. Princess Eboli, masquerading as the Queen, appeared at the climax of the "Don Carlos" ballet. In the "Nixon" ballet, Dr. Kissinger plays the villain, and Pat, followed by her husband, intervenes in the action. The opera has choruses, crowd scenes, episodes of spectacle. (The presentation of the long final scene needs rethinking; in Houston it grew visually dull, while high events and ideas were being sung of.) But there is nothing meretricious, no "effects without causes"—Wagner's phrase for the electric sunrise that brought Act III of Meyerbeer's "Le Prophète" to its close.

Goodman's libretto is written in octosyllabic couplets linked, for the most part, by near-rhyme. The metre, flexibly handled, allows a wide range of tones. The first chorus ends:

The people are the heroes now  
Behemoth pulls the peasant's plow  
When we look up, the fields are white  
With harvest in the morning light  
And mountain ranges one by one  
Rise red beneath the harvest moon.

And the final scene contains this exchange between the President and the First Lady:

PAT You won at poker.  
NIXON I sure did.  
I had a system. Five-card stud  
Taught me a lot about mankind.  
Speak softly and don't show your hand  
Became my motto.  
PAT Tell me more.  
NIXON Well, the Pacific theater  
Was not much to write home about.  
PAT Yes, dear. I think you told me that.

The choruses and dialogue of "The





Red Detachment" are in Skeltonics, or "tumbling verse":

Flesh rebels  
The body pulls  
Those inflamed souls  
That mark its trials  
Into the war.  
Arm this soldier!

In a lecture Goodman invoked Skelton's morality play "Magnyfycence" and Andrew Marvell's "Bermudas" as influences on "Nixon in China." The influence of the first is easier to find, both technically (Goodman could claim of some rough passages, as Skelton did, "For though my ryme be ragged, Tattered and jagged . . . It hath in it some pyth") and thematically. Her lines are good to sing. And without simplism or glibness she has written philosophical and political speeches for Mao, Chou En-lai, and Nixon in poetry that bears pondering.

The music caught me by surprise, for I thought I'd had more than my fill of Minimalism, and a first glance at the piano-vocal score—an A-minor scale thirty times repeated, over alternate A and F pedals, while upper voices climb the scale more slowly—had been daunting. But Adams' command of mounting tension and slow or sudden release, of clouding and brightening, is so sure that during the performance no tedium set in. There are a few passages where formula becomes insistent. The alternation of dominant-seventh chords and exotic resolutions is perhaps overworked. The alternation of triads with two notes in common (like those that open the last act of "Don Carlos") is protracted for bars on end. Yet the music of "Nixon" became more, not less, interesting on repeated hearings. As the opera proceeds, the writing grows richer, rhythmically freer, more lyrical. Pat's aria in Act II is a number that sopranos will want to lift out for concert repertory. Mme. Mao's triumphant coloratura aria—originally the second-act finale—is a showstopper. In the ballet, there is a romantic pas de deux aspiring to more-than-Minkus rapture—at once a parody and a fond tribute to surefire device. The Red Detachment enters, on point, to a perky tune both funny and exciting. "Nixon" is entertaining as well as serious. The vocal writing gives to each character a distinctive, revealing mode of utterance—of rhythm, of gait, of melodic outline. The orchestration, as always with Adams, is colorful and precisely expressive.

A criticism of the piece may be that

it presents Mr. Nixon in too favorable and romanticized a light. In a program note Goodman writes:

I pondered Nixon's love of history and his belief in peace and progress . . . I became more and more certain that every character in the opera should be made as eloquent as possible . . . the heroic quality of the work as a whole would be determined by the eloquence of each character in his or her own argument.

So the opera needs to be heard with critical ears; it doesn't do our thinking for us. For five scenes, it glows with the euphoria engendered by the Peking meeting; only in the last scene do some weariness, wariness, and disillusion set in. Kissinger is cast as a buffo—during the ballet, a lecherous, sadistic buffo—but otherwise there are no villains. Program notes describe Mao as "probably the closest thing to Plato's Philosopher King that this world will ever see" and Chou En-lai as a Lincoln to Mao's Washington. Premier Chou has the last word, in a visionary, beautiful song:

How much of what we did was good?  
Everything seems to move beyond  
Our remedy. Come, heal this wound.  
At this hour nothing can be done.  
Just before dawn the birds begin,  
The warblers, who prefer the dark,  
The cage-birds answering. To work!  
Outside this room the chill of grace  
Lies heavy on the morning grass.

There was a very fine cast, conducted by John DeMain. Carolann Page was a touching Mrs. Nixon. Trudy Ellen Craney was an incisive Mme. Mao, with a rare ability to project distinct vowels high above the staff. John Duykers' Mao, harsh in timbre, was poetic and wise in delivery. James Maddalena's Nixon was buoyant, intelligent, and believable; and, as a colleague put it, "he also communicated something the real Nixon almost never could, a sense of inner life." Sanford Sylvan filled Chou En-lai's music with a luminous beauty of sound and utterance. Peter Sellars' direction, Adrienne Lobel's sets, Dunya Ramicova's costumes, and James Ingalls' lighting conspired to create a stage action always vital, focussed, at one with the music, the words, the drama as a whole. Mark Morris's choreography was both chilling and funny.

Houston has an admirable creative record. "Nixon in China" was the fourth new American opera it has produced in recent years, and was the second opera to be played in the larger auditorium of the new Gus S. Wortham Theater Center.



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"NIXON IN CHINA" NEW JOHN ADAMS/ALICE GOODMAN OPERA, DIRECTED BY PETER  
SELLARS MAKES NEW YORK PREMIERE AT  
THE 1987 NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL DECEMBER 4-17

NIXON IN CHINA, which runs December 4-17 in BAM's Opera House, as part of the Fifth Annual NEXT WAVE Festival, sponsored by Philip Morris Companies Inc., is a two-act opera which traces the historic visit of former President Richard Nixon to China in 1972 which established normal relations between the United States and China. Central characters in the work include: Richard & Pat Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Mao Tse-Tung, Chiang Ching (Madame Mao) and Chou En-lai.

The subject matter is treated in a stylized, mythic fashion. Composer John Adams comments, "To me the subconscious of our culture is really more profoundly affected by myths of the great world figures, and in Nixon and Mao I was able to identify very strong archetypes." There are moments that are thoughtful and reflective; particularly when Nixon and Mao discuss and challenge each others views of economics & freedom. In one especially moving scene, the Nixons are so taken with a performance of the ballet "The Red Detachment Of Women", choreographed by Mark Morris, that they join in the action of the dance.

Set designer Adrienne Lobel and costume designer Dunya Ramicova have worked to recreate the visit from contemporary press coverage of the visit. One source of inspiration was a special March 1972 issue of Life Magazine, from which documented occurrences of the trip are brought to life on stage.

NIXON IN CHINA is the first operatic work of the San Francisco-based composer John Adams, who has garnered wide acclaim in recent years for his orchestral works, most notably "Harmonium" and "Harmonielehre." From 1982 to 1985 Mr. Adams was Composer-in-Residence with the San Francisco Symphony. Considered a second generation of the "minimalist school," Adams's compositions are marked by lush textures and a range of romantic and dramatic expression.

Writer Alice Goodman's libretto is a combination of historical research and literary imagination. Ms. Goodman drew on books, tapes and newspapers of the period. She chose not to contact any of the characters involved because "They're not the same people they were then, and I didn't wish to prejudice the material by hearing their recollections of the trip." Ms. Goodman graduated from Harvard where she had collaborated with Peter Sellars on a number of theatrical

-more-



productions. A poet who now lives in Cambridge, England, Ms. Goodman is presently writing a new text for Debussy's "Martyrdom Of St. Sebastian."

The director Peter Sellars, who has worked on over 100 plays, operas and spectacles, likens NIXON IN CHINA to a travelogue. Choreography is by Mark Morris, whose company appeared in the 1984 & 1986 NEXT WAVE Festival.

NIXON IN CHINA has been co-commissioned and co-produced by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Houston Grand Opera, where the work receives its world premiere on October 22, and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. where the work will be performed in the spring of 1988. The additional co-producer for the works is the Netherlands Opera Muziek Theatre.

Philip Morris Companies Inc. again serves as primary corporate sponsor for the NEXT WAVE Festival, completing a two-year \$500,000 grant for the 1986 and 1987 Festivals.

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE:

Friday, December 4 at 7 pm

Sunday, December 6 at 8 pm

~~Tuesday~~ <sup>WED</sup>, December ~~8~~ <sup>9</sup> at 8 pm

Thursday, December 10 at 8 pm

Saturday, December 12 at 8 pm

Tuesday, December 15 at 8 pm

Thursday, December 17 at 8 pm

Ticket prices range from \$15-\$40. For ticket information call 718-636-4100.

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# NEWS RELEASE

JOHN ADAMS, Composer

John Adams, one of the most widely performed of America's younger generation of composers, was born in 1947 in Worcester, Massachusetts, and grew up in Vermont and New Hampshire. After studying the clarinet with his father, Adams entered Harvard College, receiving a B.A. magna cum laude in 1969 and an M.A. in 1971, studying with Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions and David Del Tredici.

Since 1971 Adams has lived in the San Francisco Bay area where he has been active as a composer, conductor, teacher and creator of the San Francisco Symphony's highly acclaimed "New and Unusual Music" series. From 1972 to 1982 he was on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and from 1978 to 1985 he was closely associated with the San Francisco Symphony, first as the orchestra's New Music Adviser and later as Composer in Residence.

Adams' creative output spans a wide variety of media to include works for video (Saxophone and Triggering), but his instrumental compositions, particularly those for orchestra, have brought him the most recognition. Among these are Harmonium (1981) for chorus and large orchestra, Shaker Loops (1978/83) for strings, Grand Pianola Music (1982) and Harmonielehre (1985), for orchestra. In 1983 he was commissioned to create a large-scale collaborative work for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The resulting work, Available Light, with choreography by Lucinda Childs and a set by architect Frank Gehry, was premiered in Los Angeles in September of that year.

Adams' music appears frequently on the programs of major orchestras in both the U.S. and Europe, and virtually all of his principal works have been recorded on major labels. In 1985 five different LP recordings of his works were released with three of these (Harmonium on ECM, Grand Pianola Music on Angel and Harmonielehre on Nonesuch) appearing on Billboard Magazine's Bestselling Classical Albums charts, "...possibly a unique achievement for a living composer" (The New Republic magazine).

Currently John Adams is at work on a three-act opera Nixon in China, in collaboration with stage director Peter Sellars and poet Alice Goodman. A joint commission from the Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Nixon in China will open the new Wortham Theater for the Houston Grand Opera in October 1987.

3/87, rev. 7/29/87  
bio.1

Houston Grand  
**Opera**



## JOHN ADAMS, Composer

Born in 1947, John Adams grew up in New Hampshire, and had his first musical experience as a clarinetist in wind ensembles, in which his father also performed. In 1965, he began studying composition with Leon Kirchner, at Harvard College. In 1971, he moved to California, settling in San Francisco in 1972. Besides directing the New Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory, he has been associated with the San Francisco Symphony since 1978, and is the director (and founder) of that orchestra's "New and Unusual Music Series."

Adams composed electronic and tape pieces early in his career; and during his student years, his interests leaned more towards atonality. In the early 1970's, while minimalism was beginning to come of age, primarily on the East Coast, Adams was more firmly under the influence of John Cage and other aleatory (chance) composers. Yet, by 1973, he had embarked on a return to a tonality that would lead him towards his own brand of minimal style.

Unlike his East Coast predecessors, Adams jumped directly into scoring for conventional instruments; and instead of pursuing specific rhythmic or harmonic problems through a long series of works, he addressed different dilemmas in each piece. In Shaker Loops (1979), a magnificent string septet, he gives each of his players a repetitive figure, but since each figure is of a different length, new structures emerge as the players continue repeating. In Phrygian Gates, a solo piano work composed the same year, Adams explores the circle of fifths in a huge, arch-like structure. His more recent scores have been orchestral works, among these Common Tones in Simple Time (1979), and Harmonium (1981), a dark-textured, massive score requiring a chorus and orchestra some 275 strong.

Grand Pianola Music (1982) is scored for a much smaller orchestra of winds, percussion, sopranos, and two pianos, and it is a work of an entirely different character. In contrast to the consistently serious tone of Harmonium, Grand Pianola Music has a light-hearted humorous and at times, sharply parodistic edge — aspects of its character that have led to explosively divided reactions to the piece after its San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam performances. Those reactions led the composer to consider withdrawing the score at one point but he eventually decided against it, simply because the work succeeds in expressing the things he wanted to express.

8/6/87  
Bio.2



**ALICE GOODMAN, Librettist**

Poet Alice Goodman was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on April 1, 1958. She attended Harvard and Cambridge Universities and is currently at Cambridge writing a new text for Debussy's Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Her poetry has been widely published on both sides of the Atlantic. Nixon in China is her first opera.

7/27/87, rev. 8/17/87



**PETER SELLARS, Director**

Peter Sellars has directed over 100 plays, operas and miscellaneous spectacles. In 1983, he was awarded a MacArthur Prize Fellowship. He currently is working on a book for Harper and Row. Next year he will make his first film.

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## Mark Morris, Choreographer

Mark Morris was born, raised and currently lives in Seattle, where he studied with Vera Flowers and Perry Brunson. He has performed with the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, Hannah Kahn Dance Company, Laura Dean Dancers and Musicians, Eliot Feld Ballet and Koleda Balkan Dance Ensemble. In addition to the Mark Morris Dance Group, he has set works for Pacific Northwest Ballet, CoDanceCo, Jacob's Pillow Dancers, Spokane Ballet, Batsheva Dance Company, Concert Dance Company of Boston and Repertory Dance Company of Canada. In 1985, Mr. Morris created Mort Subite for the Boston Ballet, one of nine commissions of the National Choreography Project and received a second commission in 1986 to create Esteemed Guests for the Joffrey Ballet. Mr. Morris also teaches regularly at the University of Washington in Seattle. He has received Choreography Fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts (1980-81 and 1983-84) and from the National Endowment for the Arts (1983-86). He was commissioned by the Jerome Foundation to create two new works, New Love Song Waltzes (1982) and The Death of Socrates (1983) for Dance Theater Workshop's New Works Project. Mr. Morris received a New York Dance and Performance Award (Bessie) in 1984 for Choreographic Achievement and was most recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for choreography.

The Mark Morris Dance Group was formed in 1980 and gave its first annual New York home season concert that year at the Merce Cunningham Studio. For four seasons, the Group was produced by Dance Theater Workshop; in the "Split Stream" series in December 1981, and the "Fall Series" in November 1982, December 1983, and December 1985. In 1984 and 1986, the Group appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the Next Wave Festival. Since 1984, the group has toured extensively throughout the United States and Europe and was recently featured on an hour-long program on the PBS Dance in America series. In 1986, the group held an intensive workshop at the University of Washington in Seattle, which it will repeat in the summer of 1987. Future plans include the continued touring and performance of new works, as well as collaborations with opera and ballet companies.

4/20/87; rev. 7/29/87  
Mark Morris Dance Group  
104 Franklin St.  
NY, NY 10013  
(212) 219-3660



**ADRIANNE LOBEL, Set designer**

Adrianne Lobel's collaborations with Peter Sellars include Così fan tutte at the PepsiCo Summerfare, The Mikado at the Chicago Lyric Opera, Hang on to Me at the Guthrie, The Visions of Simone Machard at La Jolla Playhouse, The Inspector General at the American Repertory Theatre and currently Nixon in China, a world premiere at Houston Grand Opera in October, 1987.

Ms. Lobel designed sets for My One and Only on Broadway. She won an Obie Award for her designs for The Vampires, written and directed by Harry Kondoleon at the Astor Place Theatre and All Night Long, directed by Andre Gregory, at the Second Stage. Other off-Broadway credits include Women of Manhattan at Manhattan Theatre Club, for which she received a Maharam nomination, The Dreamer Examines His Pillow and Savage in Limbo, all by John Patrick Shanley; Anteroom at Playwright's Horizons and Orchards for The Acting Company.

Her work has also been seen at Hartford Stage Company, The Guthrie Theater, The American National Theatre, The Oxford Playhouse, Yale Repertory Theatre, American Repertory Theatre, Goodman Theatre and Arena Stage, where she has served as an Associate Artist.

Recently, Ms. Lobel completed production design on Five Corners, a film directed by Tony Bill and Bad, a new Michael Jackson video directed by Martin Scorsese.

5/26/87, revised 7/29/87



**DUNYA RAMICOVA, Costume Designer**

Dunya Ramicova is a resident costume designer at the Yale Repertory Theatre and a faculty member at the Yale School of Drama. She also has designed costumes for Alaska Repertory Theatre, American Repertory Theatre, American Ballet Theatre, American National Theatre, Arena Stage Company, Acting Company, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Chicago Lyric Opera, Castle Hill Opera Company, Dogle Image Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Guthrie Theatre, Hartford Stage Company, Hartford Ballet, Juillard School, Long Wharf Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, Mark Taper Forum, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Opera Theatre of Boston, Public Theatre, PepsiCo Summerfare, Philadelphia Company and Williamstown Theatre Festival.

8/6/87



**JAMES F. INGALLS, lighting designer**

Opera: Così fan tutte, Don Giovanni, Giulio Cesare, Orlando, and The Lighthouse Opera for Peter Sellars; Il Matrimonio Segreto for Santa Fe Opera; Ikarus for Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria; Passagio and Il Combattimento Di Tancredi e Clorinda for Festival D'Aix-en-Provence; The Electrification of the Soviet Union at Glyndebourne.

American National Theatre: Ajax and The Count of Monte Cristo (Helen Hayes Awards), Idiot's Delight, and A Seagull.

Broadway: 'night, Mother, and The Human Comedy.

Off Broadway: On the Verge (1987 Obie Award), Isn't it Romantic and Geniuses.

Regional: Guthrie Theatre, Goodman Theatre, Seattle Rep, Baltimore's Center Stage, Santa Fe Festival Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse (Two Dramalogue Awards), and Hartford Stage Company.



Review/Music

# 2 Composers Conduct Their Own Works

By DONAL HENAHAN

Early in his composing career, John Adams became infatuated with Minimalism and, despite his belief that he has moved beyond its simpler formulas, continues to travel on a narrow-gauge track. His "Fearful Symmetries," which the Orchestra of St. Luke's presented at Carnegie Hall on Monday evening under the composer's direction, chugged along for 25 minutes without passing through interesting country, let alone arriving at a station.

The problem with "Fearful Symmetries" and other works of its synthetic type is not that the ear finds its sonorities or mechanisms difficult to absorb. The piece, on the contrary, pulsates with such soothing regularity that the listener might be in the arms of a wet nurse. Instrumental sections play the same note or handful of notes for minutes at a time, after which they change gears and harp on another equally economical pattern. At its piston-pumping best, "Fearful Symmetries" put one in mind of older, similarly locomotive works like Honegger's "Pacific 231" or Villa-Lobos's "Little Train of the Capira."

Composers of Mr. Adams's generation, reared in a popular culture dominated by rock music with its relentless hammering on one beat in a measure, took to Minimalism naturally. Understandably, they often have trouble moving beyond rock's regular, throbbing appeal when setting out to write more interesting music. In "Fearful Symmetries," Mr.

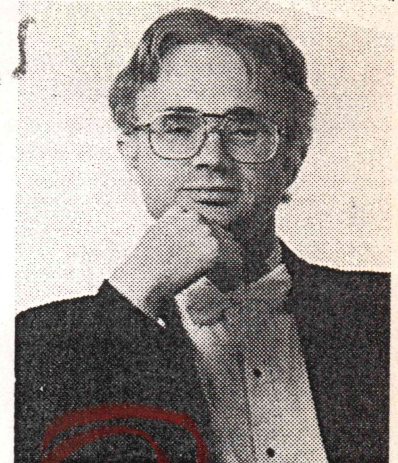
## The Program

ORCHESTRA OF ST. LUKE'S, John Adams and Charles Wuorinen, conductors; Fred Sherry, cellist; Jeffrey Kahane, pianist. At Carnegie Hall.

Adams ..... "Fearful Symmetries"  
Wuorinen  
"Five: Concerto for Amplified Cello and Orchestra"  
Copland ..... "Music for the Theater"  
Gershwin ..... "Rhapsody in Blue"

Adams adds metrical complexities and the variety of rhythmic counterpoint known as syncopation (fourth species), but these efforts are frustrated by the unyielding, metronomic squareness that characterizes most such Minimally inspired works.

The other contemporary piece on the program required the versatile St. Luke's ensemble to shift to a different degree of difficulty. It did so without apparent strain. Charles Wuorinen's "Five: Concerto for Amplified Cello and Orchestra," also led by its composer, had what he described in a program note as "populist elements." The work, written in 1988 for the New York City Ballet, reportedly served that public purpose well. Some audience-appealing elements could be recognized in the traditionally virtuosic demands the piece consistently made on Fred Sherry, the cello soloist — episodes like the first movement's wild cadenza certainly kept Mr. Sherry's capable fingers in motion. Still, Mr. Wuorinen's five-section score, though not particularly complex by his older



John Adams, the conductor and composer.

Serial standards, provided few other compelling reasons for hearing it again.

Mr. Adams, who has conducting ambitions that go beyond overseeing his own scores, led two other works: Copland's "Music for the Theater" and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," the latter in the original orchestration that Ferde Grofé made for Paul Whiteman's band in 1924. Coming on the heels of Leonard Bernstein's conducting of the same Copland score with the New York Philharmonic, Mr. Adams's presentation struck one as clean and honest but rather square. The Tin Pan Alley inflections that give both the Copland and the Gershwin pieces much of their character were generally ironed out. Mr. Adams, perhaps misled by the cabaretlike orchestration of the "Rhapsody," let his small band blare out mercilessly, blotting out much of the solo piano part. When he could be heard, Jeffrey Kahane seemed to be fully in command of the work's raffish manner and Gershwin's pyrotechnical writing for instrument.

'Chicken